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10 STORIES 10¢

OCTOBER

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Unique Novelet

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

THE PREMATURE OBITUARY

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

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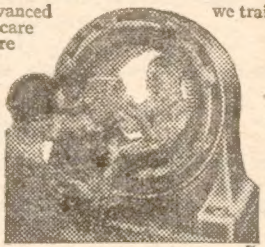

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TEN DETECTIVE ACES

10 STORIES 10¢

A. A. WYN
Editor

An ACE Magazine

MAURICE J. PHILLIPS
Managing Editor

October, 1941

Vol. XLII, No. 4

★ 10 New, Different Stories—No Serials ★

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Cover by Norm Saunders

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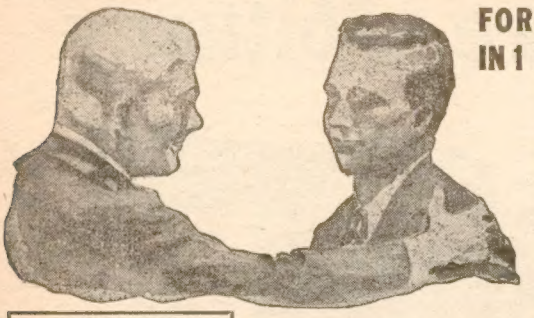

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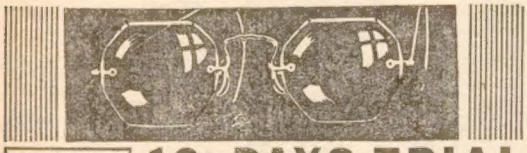

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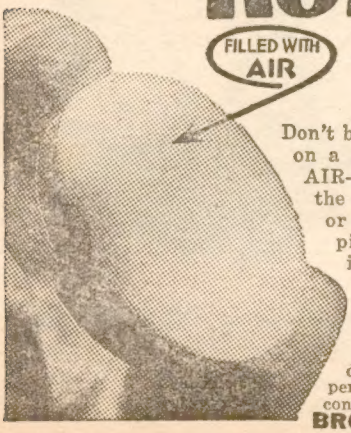

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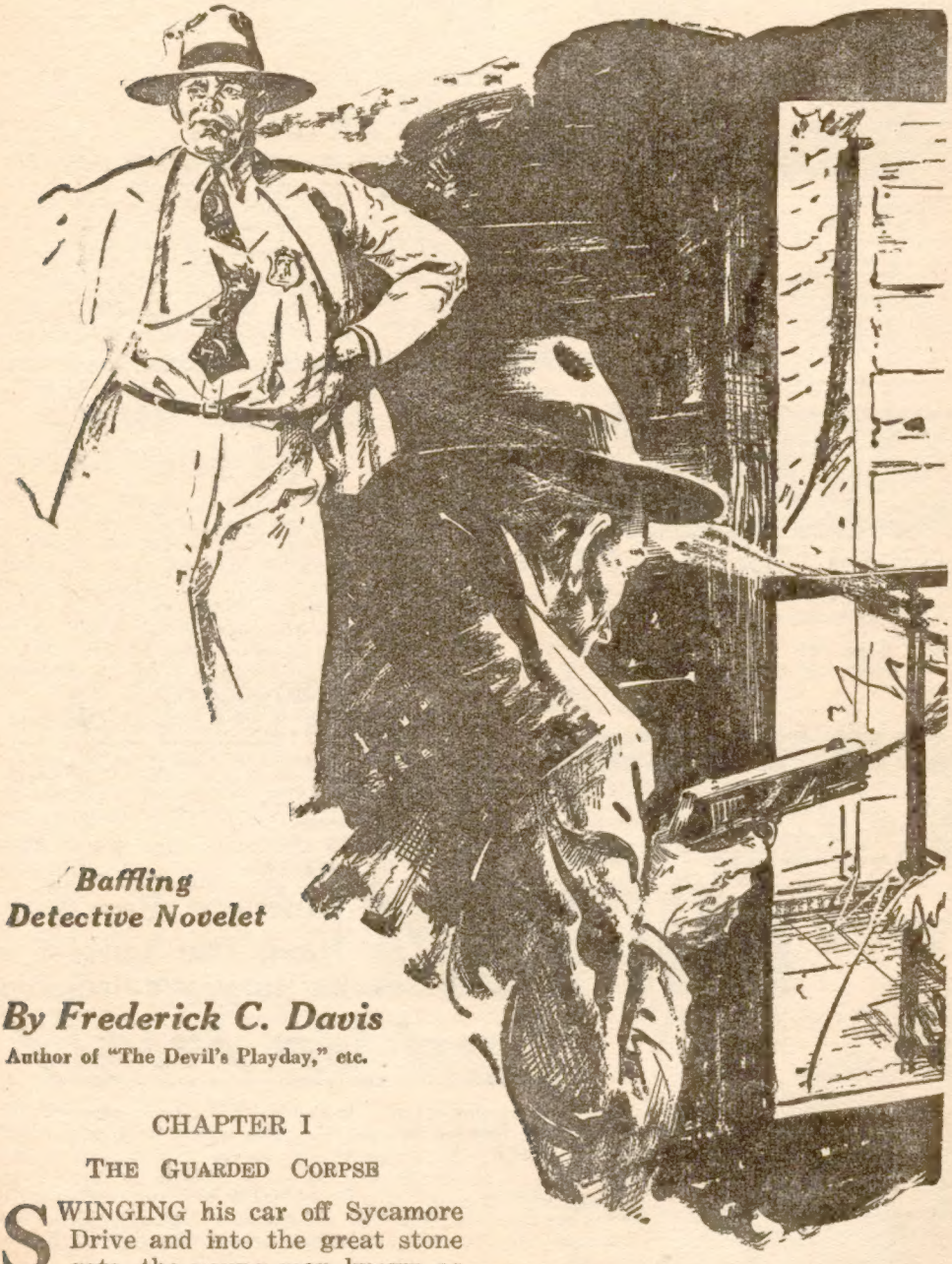


Baffling Detective Novelet

By Frederick C. Davis

Author of "The Devil's Playday," etc.

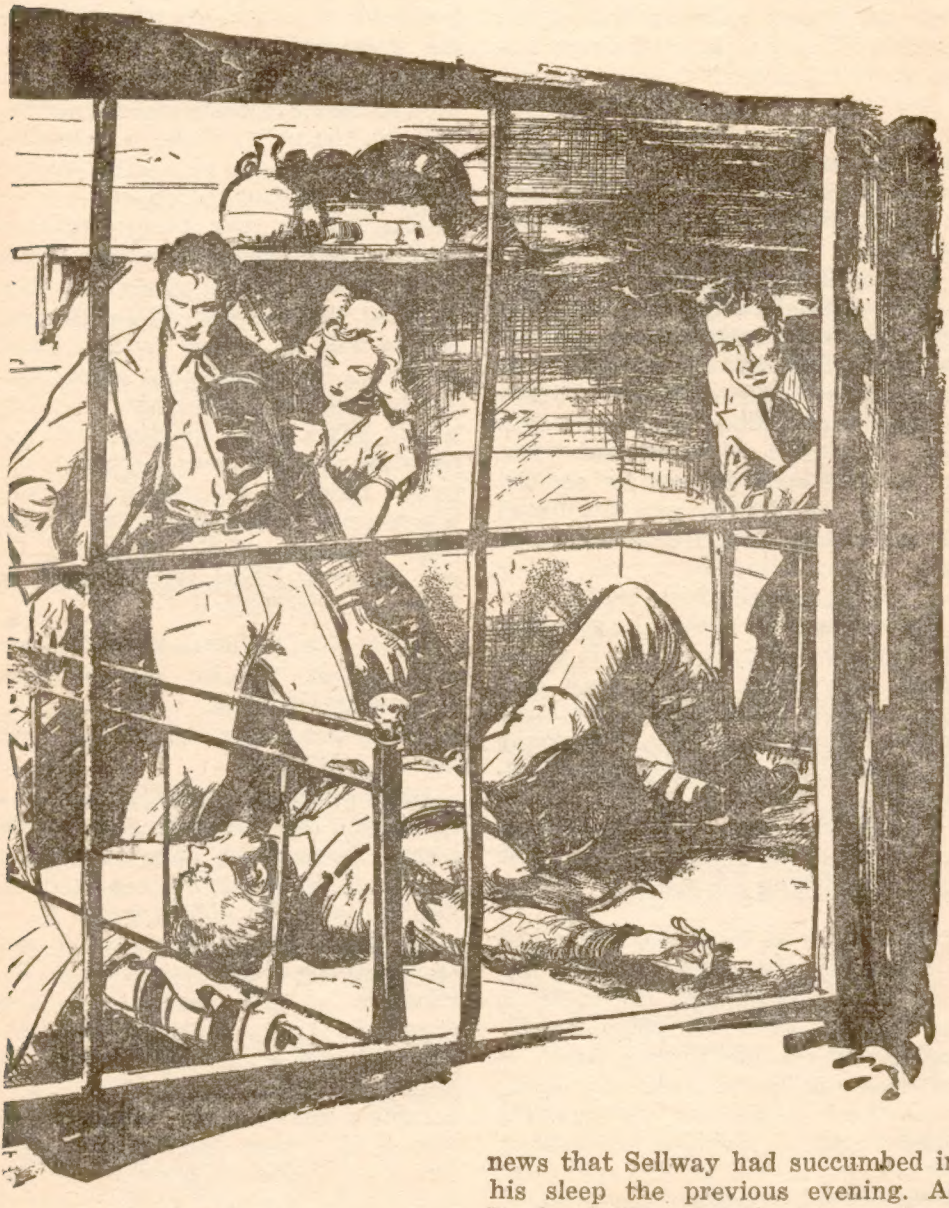
CHAPTER I

THE GUARDED CORPSE

SWINGING his car off Sycamore Drive and into the great stone gate, the young man known as "Death-Notice" Dayle let it drift to a stop.

The beams of the headlights, streaming across a white-columned portico, focused on a black wreath which announced to all who came that not many hours ago death had preceded them through this door.

Death-Notice Dayle, obituary solicitor extraordinary, was trying to sell the wrong client. For the corpse in the coffin suddenly took it on the lam and left the embalmer waiting on the morgue steps.



Marking the home of Alden Sellway, it put an abrupt period to Sellway's brilliant career as a builder of airplanes.

Yesterday morning's headlines had anounced the shockingly unexpected news that Sellway had succumbed in his sleep the previous evening. As Dayle alertly eyed the house where Sellway's body now lay, other headlines marched through his mind—scareheads piling sensation upon sensation.

Today a black banner had shouted: "Police Suspect Sellway Poisoned!"

Later editions had cried: "Cyanide Found in Sellway's Capsules!" Developments had rapidly followed, jolting Dayle: "Philip Thorne Disappears; Suspected in Sellway Killing!" And the latest editions today had howled: "Thorne Still Missing; Police Search Spreads!"

Realizing how doggedly an army of cops was hunting for his friend Phil Thorne, the young man known as Death-Notice Dayle carefully scanned the grounds as he neared the Sellway house.

Easing his car deeper along the curving drive, he tried to assure himself that no detectives were spotting the place. The wind was rattling in the lilacs and the elms were creaking overhead, filling the night with such a confusion of sounds and movements that he could not be certain. Driving on slowly toward the broad steps, he spoke quietly over his shoulder.

"Watch yourself. Stay here."

In the rear-view mirror he glimpsed the dim reflection of a face. It was a young man's face, with earnest eyes and a firmly fixed mouth. At once, heeding Dayle's warning, the young man again sank deep into the blackness inside the car.

He was the reason why Dayle was approaching the Sellway home with such painstaking caution.

LESS than an hour ago Dayle had received the phone call. He had immediately recognized the voice on the wire, though it had spoken breathlessly, without identifying itself. It had made an appeal which, warmly sympathetic as he was, he could not ignore. Though realizing the danger in his move, he had driven rapidly out of the city to a remote crossroads.

There he had kept the anxiously appointed r e n d e z v o u s. During the twelve-mile trip back, a secret passenger had huddled behind Dayle, desperate to keep himself under cover until he could reach this house of death.

Nerves tight, Dayle braked behind two cars that were waiting in front of the house. He reached for the radio. News bulletins concerning the Sellway case had been coming over it at frequent intervals. Another was being announced while Dayle's hand lingered on the switch.

"The result of their thorough-going inquiry, the police state, is that they have found no one who might have a motive for poisoning Sellway except Philip Thorne, the free-lance aeronautics expert, who remains missing.

"The district attorney has announced that anyone aiding Thorne's escape will be judged equally guilty under the law. The police believe that Thorne will be forced out of hiding within a few hours, together with any persons who may have harbored him. Once taken into custody, Philip Thorne will be charged with the first degree murder of the father of the girl he was informally engaged to marry—Ruth Sellway."

Dayle grimly clicked the switch and spoke again into the darkness concealing the fugitive.

"Keep out of sight, Phil. I'll bring her out—if I can."

Having brought Phil Thorne secretly back to the doorstep of the victim whom Thorne was believed to have poisoned, Dayle left his car—left the hunted man still hidden inside it.

He mounted the steps to the door on which the black wreath hung. The windows of the house were dim, draped by heavy curtains. When the wind relented a moment, allowing the bushes and the trees to grow still, it became a hushed place—almost as silent as if it were deserted. Feeling a strange atmosphere brooding over it, Dayle lifted his hand to the knocker.

Its clacking noise seemed to reverberate throughout the house. But there was no answer.

Waiting, Dayle heard voices. They were issuing from somewhere in the rear of the house—a girl's voice, strained and lifted with anxiety, and

two men's, one gruff, the other edged.

Engaged in an altercation, they were paying no heed to Dayle's summons at the door. Their voices went on, clashing more sharply, until Dayle heard the girl cry out, as if the men's insistence had suddenly become intolerable to her.

"I won't let you touch him—won't let you kill him!"

Then again the house was hushed.

Looking across his shoulder, warning Phil Thorne with a careful gesture to remain in hiding, Dayle quietly depressed the latch and opened the entrance. He stepped into a long, gloomy hall.

Now the voices were not speaking. Instead, he heard heels beating on the floor, as if one of the men was agitatedly pacing back and forth. The girl was quietly sobbing. Even these sounds ceased after a moment, while Dayle stood gazing into a front room that was filled with a dim, flickering light.

He was drawn to the coffin sitting there, and as he moved into the glow of the tall, thin candles burning at its head and foot, amazement widened his eyes.

The flames drifted, throwing their shine upon a bank of beribboned wreaths and pale flowers. They glowed over the rows of folding chairs which awaited the mourners. According to the announcements printed in the *Item*, the funeral would take place at noon tomorrow.

Everything was now in readiness for the final service, Dayle saw—except that the body of Alden Sellway was absent.

The candlelight wavered on the tufted lining of the casket, rippled on a pillow. A long indentation remained in the glistening softness of the satin, but the dead man was resting there no longer.

Standing alone beside the empty coffin, Death-Notice Dayle wondered where the corpse had gone.

AS QUICK footfalls came down the hall, Dayle turned. The two men who appeared, he surmised, were the same two whose voices had been lifted in anger. Both of them were agitated, pale. They caught sight of Dayle and halted, the indignant determination in their eyes changing to quick alarm.

"Dennis Dayle! You've heard?"

Dr. Anthony Croft asked the question brusquely, his shaggy eyebrows lowered—a burly, bearlike man of forceful presence and forbidding scowl. He could not mean the death of Alden Sellway, or even the theory of murder, for the service wires had already carried this news over the entire country. He was concerned about a matter that was quite different—and, perhaps, secret.

"You've heard? Then let it go no further! I can't let you make capital of this ghastly thing—can't permit you to print a word of it in the *Item*."

"I'm not a reporter, doctor," Dayle said. "My specialty is death notices."

Death was Dayle's job, in much the same way that it was the job of his closest associates, the city's morticians. As death made its inevitable rounds, visiting several score of homes in the city every twenty-four hours, Dayle followed in its dark steps.

A solicitor of paid insertions for the *Item*, he called on each bereaved family in turn, with his quietly reassuring manner and his sympathetic smile, just as he was visiting the Sellway residence tonight.

"But if it's news—" he added.

"It must remain a private matter, Dayle, strictly private!" Dr. Croft insisted. "Ruth has simply suffered an overwhelming shock — first her father's sudden death, then learning that the man she loves is being hunted for killing him. Too great a shock. Naturally it has affected her mind a bit—but only temporarily, of course. This horrible thing she's doing is a form of escape, an effort to wipe the truth out of existence—but in a few

hours, I'm sure, Ruth will realize how wrong she is."

In Dr. Croft's intense eyes Dayle searched for the full meaning of his cryptic plea. He asked shrewdly—a shot in the dark: "But suppose Ruth is right?"

Croft's scowl darkened. "As Alden Sellway's physician for the past eight years," he asserted, "I assure you that Ruth is making a hideous mistake. But because she insisted on them, I have made every known test. The results are negative, yet she refuses to accept them. We cannot permit her to keep on with this thing, Dayle. There must be no publicity, even though she's forcing us to resort to extreme measures in order to avoid a ghastly scandal."

Still feeling his way, Dayle said quietly, "I've known Ruth ever since we were kids, doctor. She's strong-willed, but very clear-minded. She must have sound reasons for insisting."

"Nonsense!" Croft growled. "We've humored her—yielded even to the extent of agreeing that the body must not be embalmed. But now—good lord, this is too much!"

Croft straightened, his eyes fierce. "For my part, Dayle, I've taken my stand. Ruth must be stopped in spite of herself. Whatever drastic tactics are necessary, we must take them now—make sure at once that Alden Sellway will be peacefully and decently buried!"

Dr. Croft's agitation was so great that his self-control threatened to break. He turned abruptly and strode from the house—strode toward the car in which Dayle had left Philip Thorne hiding.

DAYLE scarcely breathed until he heard Croft hastening away. As the noises of the doctor's car faded toward the big gate, Dayle again gazed, his wonderment mounting, into the vacant coffin of Alden Sellway.

The second of the two men remained, intently estimating Dayle.

His face resembled that of the fugitive whom Dayle had brought secretly to this house—a pallid face that did not often see the sun. He was Roger Thorne, Phil's younger brother, whose ambitions lay in the field of architecture. While studying for his state exams, which he must pass in order to open an accredited office of his own, he was working as a draughtsman on the staff of the city's busiest architect. In his greenish-blue eyes Dayle saw the same feverish strain that had overworn the patience of Dr. Croft.

"Dennis," he said quickly, "if you have any influence with Ruth, for Pete's sake try to bring her back to her senses! She's trying to help Phil, but actually she's making it worse for him, and for herself as well. So much worse that they'll be certain to convict him of the murder—and perhaps even name her as an accomplice."

Dayle's eyebrows lifted. "Is it possible, Roger, that you believe your brother is guilty?"

"No, I don't believe it!" Roger Thorne answered swiftly. He toyed with the ruby ring he wore on his left hand. His nails glistened; he was smartly groomed, and always smelled of his barber's lotions. "At least, I'm trying my best to avoid that. But now — Ruth — *She* believes it. This thing she's doing shows she's sure of it!"

"She knows that the man she wants to marry killed her father?" Dayle's question was quick. "And knowing *that*, she's protecting him from the police?"

"Dennis," Roger Thorne said earnestly, "I want to deny it—and I can't. She *must* know. What other reasonable explanation can there be for all this? She's so much in love with Phil—she's convinced herself—that if she doesn't do it, he's certain to go to the chair."

"Surely she doesn't admit that Phil is guilty!" Dayle said.

"No, not in words. She makes fantastic excuses. But her actions—

"It hurts me to say it, but there can

be only one real reason why she's doing this. It's to prevent the police from proving that Phil is guilty of killing her father."

"I think we all want to keep them from proving that, if we can," Dayle said.

"Of course! I've retained the best trial lawyer in the state for Phil. We'll do everything possible to clear him. But—" Roger Thorne anxiously shook his perfectly trimmed head. "I've just been called back to headquarters. They want to question me again. But I'm not going."

"Not going?" Dayle blurted. "Then they'll come for you. If you refuse to talk, it will make matters look even worse for Phil."

"They won't find me, Dennis!" the fugitive's brother exclaimed. "Good lord, the case is already so black against Phil—hopeless now. But they want to make it even stronger. That's why they want to grill me. I'm afraid they'll trick me into saying something that will hurt Phil—and that's why I'm going to get out of the state until it's all over. I'm leaving right now, because I'm forced to do it—thanks to Ruth!"

Moments later, Dayle heard him start his car, unaware that his brother was hiding only a few yards away. In half a minute Roger Thorne was gone and Dayle stood alone in the hush.

He turned from the empty coffin. The L of the hall led him toward a room in the rear corner of the house—Alden Sellway's study. Bright light streamed from its partly open door. Through it Dayle saw Ruth. She had dropped to her knees beside a studio couch and she was speaking in a low, pleading voice.

"Father!" she was murmuring. "You can hear me, father—I know you can hear!"

Amazement slowed Dayle's steps. He could see a figure lying full length on the couch. The glow of a lamp shone over it—the body of Alden Sellway. Ruth's hands were closed on the cold hands of her father and her voice was insistent, beseeching.

"Answer me! Please, father, please answer me!"

She heard Dayle's step. Though his approach was quiet, she reacted to it as if it were a signal of alarm. At once she sprang up. Her high heels tapped across the study. She became a silhouette that vanished as she closed the door. The key twisted in the lock; and as Dayle halted he realized that the last thing he had seen was a gun gripped in Ruth Sellway's hand.

"I won't let you in!" Her voice penetrated the locked door with a ringing note of defiance. "If you try to come near him I'll shoot!"

CHAPTER II

Let the Grave Wait

NOW there was silence behind the door. Dayle listened keenly, making sure that he and the girl were alone in the house—alone with the body she was guarding.

He was mystified. Knowing death so well, he had grown able to sense its presence with uncanny accuracy. Solid walls might separate him from it, but when it was near he could feel its nearness as a cold twinge, like that another person might feel when entering the still gloom of a mausoleum. Facing the door behind which Alden Sellway lay, he told himself he should be feeling it now. But the chill hadn't come.

Something—some w e i r d quality that Dayle had never before met—was stifling his instinctive reaction.

"It's Dennis Dayle, Ruth," he said softly. "I've brought a message from Phil."

"From Phil!" he heard her blurt. There was distrust in her; he felt that she hadn't recognized his face in the dim light of the hall, that now she was trying to believe he had come as a friend. "Dennis—do you mean they haven't caught him—he's still safe from them?"

"I've brought him here," Dayle said. "He's waiting outside, anxious for a chance to see you. He wants to tell you he had nothing to do with it, Ruth—but first I've got to talk to you."

Dayle heard the key turning again, cautiously, in the lock. Ruth Sellway slowly opened the door. The gun remained in her hand as her blue eyes scanned Dayle's face. In it she found reassurance. She stepped out quickly, and before she closed the door behind her Dayle again glimpsed the still figure on the couch.

"Phil doesn't need to tell me that, Dennis. I know I can prove he couldn't have done it, if only they'll give me the chance. I need time, Dennis—only a few days, perhaps only a few hours—but I must have a little time."

She was pale-lipped, worn from lack of sleep. Yet her chin was lifted, and Dayle saw that, strangely, there was no grief in her eyes, not a suggestion of sorrow.

"Come with me, Ruth," he said. "We're alone now, and Phil's waiting in my car. I'll take you to him."

"No!" The word was a cry that startled Dayle. "I can't leave this room, even for a moment. I don't dare leave father!"

She had thrown herself back against the door. Distrust again shone in her eyes. But she gripped herself and spoke more quietly.

"I must stay, Dennis—and it would be too dangerous to bring Phil in here. Tell him to go where it's safer—to keep on hiding until I've shown everyone that there's no reason for the police to hound him."

Dayle reached out, closed his hands on Ruth's arms and felt her flinch.

"Let's understand this, Ruth. I'm Phil's friend, and yours. We can't believe he's guilty. But we've got to realize that the evidence against him is very strong."

Listening into the room behind her, Ruth did not answer.

"Everything points to him, Ruth. You're not yet eighteen. Your father's permission was absolutely necessary before you could marry Phil, and he flatly refused. Phil is broke. The twenty thousand he inherited from his uncle two years ago is all gone, poured into his expensive researches. More than that, he's spent every cent he could borrow—he's heavily in debt, desperately in need of money."

Ruth was silent.

"FOR years now Phil has been trying to sell the new airfoil he's been developing, and every airplane manufacturer in the country has dismissed it as a worthless dream, except Alden Sellway," Dayle went on rapidly. "Your father was the only one willing to give it a working test.

"Purely for your sake, Ruth, he agreed to use it, but only under a royalty contract so low that Phil couldn't recover his investment within twenty years. And now, suddenly, everything is changed, because your father no longer stands in his way."

The defiant gleam in Ruth's eyes grew brighter, still she did not speak.

"Now you're free to marry Phil," Dayle went on. "You're inheriting the controlling interest in your father's plant, which would give him a priceless opportunity to establish the value of his airfoil, and to cash in on it as he never could otherwise. Married to you, he'd face no more heartbreaking obstacles—he'd become rich. his future assured. The police say that's why he killed your father, and nobody can deny that it's a powerful motive, that the charge of homicide is justified."

A strange, confident smile was forming on Ruth's pale lips as Dayle paused, then went on.

"We must realize all this, Ruth. It's even known that Phil had an opportunity. Evening before last he came here, hoping he could induce your father to offer him a better contract. He came alone to this very room. Alden Sellway, taking a nap as he always did before dinner, was lying on

that couch. On the table beside him, while he slept, stood a bottle of medicinal capsules. He was taking them every four hours under Dr. Croft's orders. Then later, after Phil was gone—

"Your Aunt Caroline tried to waken your father—and couldn't. Dr. Croft, called in, pronounced him dead, but couldn't account for the suddenness of it. Next morning the police found cyanide in a number of capsules mixed in with the others. You knew the case against Phil was so black, Ruth, that you warned him by phone of what the police had discovered."

"I told him they were coming to arrest him," Ruth admitted evenly. "And I promised him I'd prove he didn't do it, if only they'd give me enough time."

"But why do you believe in him so completely?" Dayle asked. "In the face of all this damning evidence, what makes you so sure he's innocent?"

"I know that father is not dead."

Dayle stared at her. He remembered the first headlines announcing Alden Sellway's death, the others that had followed, screaming murder. He recalled the fragrance of the flowers heaped about the casket, the chairs awaiting the mourners. He knew that the arrangements for the funeral were completed—that in the morning a hearse would come to carry the body of Alden Sellway to a newly dug grave.

Ruth Sellway was stanchly denying all this, and as Dayle stared at her he remembered too that when approaching this door, which she was guarding, he had failed to feel that instinctive chill twinge which invariably marked his nearness to one who had died.

"Father is not dead, Dennis," the girl said again, her voice so firm that despite the shock of her words he could not bring himself to doubt her completely. "Not really dead."

A noise startled Ruth and quickened Dayle's pulse—the gritting of tires in the driveway. Two cars were swinging toward the portico, advancing upon Dayle's car and the fugitive he had left hidden inside it.

He listened at the girl's side, and as the entrance opened the breath came from his lungs in a surge of relief. Phil Thorne's presence, he judged, had not been discovered by the several persons who entered the hall. They did not immediately come into the L. Their footfalls moved into the room where the empty coffin sat in the candlelight.

"It's Aunt Caroline and Uncle Edward," Ruth whispered. "When I refused to let them go ahead with the arrangements they went to someone in authority—about father. But I won't—I won't let them touch him!"

There were voices in the front of the house—an ominous rumble mixing with a woman's indignant twang. Fearful of them, Ruth tugged Dayle inside the study and at once turned the key in the lock. The automatic still in her hand, she listened while Dayle gazed at the man—or corpse—lying on the couch.

ALDEN SELLWAY was surrounded by his familiar things—his desk with rolled blueprints on it, his books, his pipes. At his head, and near the window, stood the table on which his thermos jug and medicine bottles had customarily rested. Fully clothed, he seemed to be dozing, but Dayle, bending over him, saw no sign of breathing. His fingers on Sellway's wrist, he felt the coldness of Sellway's flesh, but not the slightest pulse.

Yet Sellway's daughter insisted that he still lived. Alone here with him, the curtains closely drawn, the door barred, she had been guarding him for many long hours.

"They're all against me, Dennis," Ruth said breathlessly. "None of them will listen. But I want you to believe me. There's not much time—they'll be coming back here soon, to take father away—if they can."

Dayle carefully lifted one of Alden

Sellway's eyelids, gazed at the glassy eyeball and slowly shook his head.

"But he's not dead, Dennis!" The girl's voice was raggedly insistent, as if her endurance had almost reached the breaking point. "He's just asleep—deeply asleep—so profoundly asleep that he seems to be dead, but he's really living."

Dayle said quietly, "You seem to have no doubt of it, Ruth."

"I *know!* There's not enough time to explain it fully—but it happened once before, years before I was born. Timothy Durkee was father's doctor then, and he was wise enough to recognize the condition, because he knew father had been ill, working much too hard. It was catalepsy, Dennis. It lasted only a few hours, but it was the same as this—the same, and it wasn't death."

She added quickly, "I haven't been able to reach Dr. Durkee, but I'm sure he would back me up—if only I could find him!"

The name of Timothy Durkee wandered through Dayle's memory. It was years since he had heard any mention of the eccentric old physician.

"No one else knows that it happened to father once before—no one but Dr. Durkee and me," Ruth went on. "This time it's more severe. I became sure of it the night before last when Dr. Croft admitted he could give no sound reason for—for what he called father's sudden death. I know Dr. Durkee could explain it. Dennis, do you know where he can be found?"

"No," Dayle admitted. "But—"

"Without support, I can't prove it," the girl continued, her words rushing. "There are no tests that can show the difference between death and suspended animation. There's only one sure way—to wait in the hope that father will recover. But it will take time—time they won't let me have."

Ruth's breath caught as the sound of footfalls began coming down the hall.

"They think I've lost my mind," she said with swift bitterness. "Perhaps I did go mad, a little, when I realized how blind they are, and what they were going to do to father. To fill his veins with embalming fluid—to bury him before giving him time to recover—and yesterday, when they accused Phil of murdering him and spoke of an autopsy.

"Don't you see, Dennis, it *would* kill him! That's why I brought father to this room—yesterday, when no one was watching—carried him in my arms—and locked the door to keep them out."

Listening to the footfalls coming down the hall, Dayle realized the gravity of Ruth's predicament. If Alden Sellway was not actually dead, then, certainly, Phil Thorne could not be guilty of killing him. If Thorne had not poisoned Ruth's father, an autopsy would prove it—but at the cost of Alden Sellway's life.

Resorting to the only means that could possibly solve her dilemma, Ruth was playing for time in the hope that her father would soon arise as if from the dead.

DAYLE remembered that already Ruth's purpose was dangerously misunderstood. Dr. Anthony Croft had declared, "This horrible mistake she's making is a form of escape, an effort to wipe the truth out of existence."

Even Roger Thorne, the accused man's brother, had asserted, "Ruth believes Phil is guilty. That's why she's preventing the police from proving that Phil killed her father."

Now the footsteps were close.

"Ruth," Dayle said, "I'll do my best to find Dr. Durkee."

Gratitude lighted her eyes. "If only you can, Dennis! It's so terribly important! Please bring him here at the soonest possible—"

The footfalls had stopped. A knock on the door interrupted. A gruff voice growled through the panels.

"This is Inspector Smoot. Now look here, Miss Sellway, we can't let you

delay our investigation any further. Unless you open this door—"

Dayle turned the key. Cautioning Ruth to remain behind him, he sidled out. At once the girl shut the door. Inspector Smoot, poised to thrust himself inside, was halted, his square face flushed with anger. A faint smile played across Dayle's lips.

"Not just yet, inspector. Later, perhaps."

Mike Smoot was a blunt-chinned giant who took pride in the steam-roller forcefulness of his methods and the tall, broad-brimmed white hat he constantly wore. He was wearing it now, even inside this house of death. His gaze was hostile, a habitual squint. Startled for a moment at seeing Dayle emerge from the guarded study, his face fixed into wiry lines.

"You again?" he drawled, his tone icy. "Getting yourself mixed up in another murder case? I wouldn't recommend it, Jack. It's an easy way to get yourself hurt, especially this time."

"The name is Dennis, inspector," Dayle reminded him. Whenever he faced the stony-minded Smoot their mutual animosity was aroused. "And so far as I can see, there isn't any murder."

The woman standing behind Smoot sniffed. Tall, thin and stern, Alden Sellway's sister Caroline had taken charge of the house following the death of Ruth's mother years ago. Sellway's will included her, Dayle knew, as well as her husband—the shifty-eyed, improvident lawyer standing at her side. An unimaginative, thoroughly respectable pair, they obviously felt that Ruth was creating an abhorrent scandal, that she deserved no spark of sympathy, from them.

"Ruth!" Caroline Rankin said sharply over Dayle's shoulder. "We have decided to give you one last chance to reconsider. We will grant you a few more hours, my dear. Then, unless you come to your senses, we'll be forced to take steps which will be most unpleasant for us all."

Through the door Ruth said earnestly, "I won't let you come into this room—won't let you come near him!"

Aunt Caroline tossed her head and sniffed again. "She'll soon change her tune, inspector. She's already spent one night without sleep, and she'll soon have gone twenty-four hours without food. Naturally she can't hold out much longer. Before morning we'll find our chance, I think. If not—then we've agreed that the law's demands must be met and the funeral must not be postponed."

Ruth's voice lifted behind Dayle. "Dennis!" she called through the door. "Find Dr. Durkee! Bring him, bring him!"

Mike Smoot was still eyeing Dayle. "Pay no attention to her, Jack. She's not quite right in the head. Anyway, it won't feel good if you get yourself tangled up as an accomplice, like she's doing. We might give her a break, Jack, but not you. Take a tip and get clear."

"Thanks for the advice, inspector," Dayle said. "Please try to remember that the name is Dennis—and good night."

He strode to the entrance. Running down the broad steps of the portico, he again glanced all around, deep into the blustery night. Sliding under the wheel of his car, he spoke into the darkness behind him.

"You can't see Ruth now, Phil. But later—" He paused, twisting around, eyebrows drawn together. "Phil!"

There was no one to hear him. Philip Thorne was gone.

CHAPTER III

Riddle of Death

WHEN Dayle entered the *Item* plant the big cylinders in the basement were rumbling. Passing the advertising department and parting the swinging doors of the city room, he stepped into an atmosphere of fe-

verish hustle. Typewriters and teletypes were clattering. The tow-headed copy boy was scurrying from desk to desk, distributing copies of an edition fresh from the presses.

The new headline jarred Dayle. Blackly it shouted: "Sellway Murder Thorne's Second, Police Say, Reopening Old Case!"

Staring at it, Dayle crossed the littered floor to the city desk. Perched on the edge of his chair, Neal Bannon, the city editor, was cutting into a sheaf of fresh copy with his blue pencil.

"This new stuff about Phil Thorne, Neal," Dayle said quickly, skimming down the columns. "Apparently Smoot isn't releasing the full story. But what's the real dope?"

Bannon worked rapidly for another moment, letting him wonder. Dayle did not know with what purpose Phil Thorne had disappeared from his car at the Sellway place. Deciding that Smoot had probably posted several detectives on the grounds, he had been obliged to leave without making a search for Thorne. Now the accusations against Thorne were multiplied, shaking Dayle's hope that he might find some way of helping Ruth prove him innocent.

"I'm busy as hell, Den—no time to talk right now," Bannon said, glancing up. "But it's simple enough. Phil's uncle, Hathaway Thorne died mysteriously two years ago. Smoot smelled murder but couldn't prove it. Ever since then, though, he's been plugging at it. Just when he was getting pretty close to the answer, the Sellway case broke. The payoff is that both deaths—Uncle Hathaway's and Sellway's—follow exactly the same lines. All that adds up to plenty of murdering on Phil Thorne's part."

"You mean that to Smoot's way of thinking," Dayle said, "Phil's guilt in the Sellway case proves he's also guilty of his uncle's death two years ago?"

"Right," Bannon said. "Sorry I've no time to explain the setup. Come back after I've put the final to bed. But I can tell you this much, here and now. I wouldn't bet a dime to a thousand bucks on Phil Thorne's chances of beating the rap."

Bannon's blue pencil again flew over the copy he was preparing for the *Item's* next edition. Dayle was obliged to abandon his questions.

Returning to his purpose of locating Dr. Timothy Durkee, he looked into the telephone book, then into the city directory. The most recent listing of the physician, he found, was in a directory eight years old. He turned to the *Item's* morgue to probe further.

It was a murky room lined with scarred file cases and bound volumes of back issues now yellowed with age. In a drawer Dayle found a smudged envelope marked with Durkee's name and stuffed with newspaper clippings. Most of them were dried to brittleness, but the freshest among them yielded the information he sought.

News rating only a few lines, the item was headed: "Durkee Again Arrested, Released." Stating that Timothy Durkee, formerly one of the city's most prominent physicians, had been held overnight at police headquarters under charges of drunkenness and vagrancy, it concluded:

"Having long ago abandoned his friends and associates, Durkee is now living as a recluse in a valley north of the city known as Locust Hollow, from which he seldom emerges."

Dayle turned back to the swinging doors. As he neared them they parted. The tall white hat of Inspector Smoot loomed through. Calling, no doubt, to make sure that he was receiving his full measure of publicity in connection with the Thorne manhunt, Smoot paused, his great hulk a formidable obstacle in Dayle's path.

"I was just wondering, Jack," he drawled. "Since you're an old friend of Thorne's, I was just wondering if you could tell me where I might find him."

Smoot's icy gray stare sent a shudder through Dayle. It reminded him

that the inspector could be merciless to anyone who opposed him. Lips pressed to stifle a retort that might have betrayed his purpose, Dayle shouldered past him. As he ran down the stairs he could feel the haunting force of those glacial eyes.

ONCE in his car he drove swiftly. A boulevard led him northward beyond the city limits. As he wound his way toward Locust Hallow, houses became few and lights even fewer. Dayle swung into a lonely road, and dusty, desolate hills marched past. At last, turning down a steep slope, he found a single gleam burning in the depths of the valley.

His headlights, seeming dim in the thickness of the night, streamed across a shack. It sat alone beside a brook and a small truck garden that was blighted with thirst. Its door swung open as Dayle braked. A lean shadow of a man appeared against the yellow shine of a lamp burning inside.

The man's arms dangled, his neck was scrawny and long, and he was gripping a glass half full of liquor in one gnarled hand. His voice struck suddenly at Dayle with the sting of a whiplash.

"Go away!" he snarled. "Let me alone—go back where you came from and let me alone!"

Slowly approaching him, Dayle saw that all of this old man had deteriorated except his mind and his eyes. Brilliant with intelligence but narrowed with intense bitterness, his eyes seemed to search into the secret corners of Dayle's mind.

"What do you want?" he asked with sharp suspicion. "Why have you come back?"

"Come back?" Dayle said. "There's some mistake, Dr. Durkee. This is the first time I have ever come here."

"That's a lie!" The old man's voice crackled. "This is your second visit. You came first a few minutes ago, on foot. You sneaked up to this splendid castle of mine, to spy on me in the dark. I heard you prowling around. You ran away when I called to you—ran away without answering, without letting me see you. This time you've come openly, but you can't lie to me—I know the truth. What do you want?"

Dayle merely shook his head, feeling that a further denial would sharpen the old man's asperity. "I wouldn't disturb your privacy at all, doctor, except that it's a matter of life or death. Ruth Sellway needs your help. May I come in and explain?"

"No, you may not!" Dr. Durkee emphasized his refusal by pulling the door shut behind him. It cut off the light, making him seem as gaunt as a skeleton in the shadow. "The solitude of my home is all I have left. I'll permit no one to rob me of that!"

His eyes were narrow lines. "Sellway, you say. Alden Sellway's daughter? Needs me? Preposterous! I don't trust you—don't trust any living man. Go away—go away!"

Dayle did not move. "Many years ago, doctor, you attended Alden Sellway when he suffered a brief attack of catalepsy. Now he has apparently succumbed to another, and no one will believe he's not dead—no one but his daughter Ruth. She must have your testimony in order to convince them."

The bitterness of Timothy Durkee's laugh mocked Dayle. "You come to me as a physician? To *me?* Don't you know that my right to practise medicine was snatched away from me years ago? I am no longer a man of science. I am a shiftless, drunken, dishonored blunderer, and you, young man—" He raised his shaking hand, stared at the glass, then jerked it to his lips and drained it. "You're a fool to ask my help now!"

Gazing at him, Dayle wondered. Timothy Durkee had once been a surgeon of stature whose word had carried the weight of authority. No doctor in the state had enjoyed a more lucrative practise or a finer reputation. So devoted to his profession that he had overworked himself, he had resorted to liquor to fortify himself

against the wearing demands on his time and energy.

It had undone him. Excluded from his beloved profession, he had become, after eight wretched years, a pariah. What force would his word carry now? Dayle was struck with discouragement by the thought, but he persisted.

"Dr. Durkee, you alone can refute the people who insist that Alden Sellway is dead. The rest doesn't matter. You still possess all your knowledge, all your experience. Being thoroughly familiar with Sellway's deathlike condition, you can diagnose it correctly. I ask you to come with me. There's no one else who can save him—save him from the horror of being buried while alive."

THE old man muttered: "Come with you? They wouldn't listen to me now. They'd laugh at me, heap scorn on me, dismiss me. Look at my shabby clothes, my ugly face, my twisted fingers. Come with you—to that house? Tell me, young man, is *she* still there—the woman—Caroline Rankin?"

Dr. Durkee spoke the name with such biting hatred that Dayle hesitated to answer.

"*She* did this to me!" Durkee snapped.

Dayle recalled the sensational trial which had destroyed the physician's career. At that time he was Alden Sellway's doctor and also Caroline Rankin's. He was called upon in the middle of the night, after a particularly exhausting day, to perform an emergency appendectomy on Sellway's sister.

The liquor he had taken overwhelmed his frayed nerves. His blunder was not serious, though Caroline Rankin's recovery, as a consequence, was slow and painful. Righteously vindictive, the woman had lodged charges of criminal malpractise against Dr. Durkee.

Convinced that he had operated on Mrs. Rankin while intoxicated, the jury had returned a verdict of guilty. Durkee might have been sent to prison and heavily fined, but a kindly judge had spared him. There was no way, however, of escaping the penalty of another state law stipulating that a doctor convicted of a felony must be permanently deprived of his license to practise medicine.

Remembering this, Dayle thought that Durkee might have found a sentence of death more merciful, and he realized how profoundly the old man hated the woman who had brought this worse disaster upon him.

"But Alden Sellway tried to stop her, for your sake, doctor," Dayle reminded him. "He even testified in your behalf. And it's Alden Sellway, and Ruth, who need your help. Caroline Rankin is opposing Ruth now as heartlessly as she once opposed you. Unless you prevent it, she will cause Alden Sellway's false death to become his *real* death."

The haggard old man was silent. His eyes glittered in the gloom as he considered Dayle's plea. Dayle saw a strange light kindle in them and grow into a flame that burned almost wildly. Abruptly he was nodding his gaunt head.

"I'll come!" he rasped. "Go back to your car—wait a moment. First I must find my case—I must steady my nerves. I'll make them listen to me, the fools! Don't they realize there is only one proof—only one unquestionable proof of death? Yes, I'll open their blind eyes! Wait in your car, young man—I'll come!"

He disappeared through the door. Turning away, Dayle heard him move hastily about the shack, then pause. The clink of glass touching glass followed, then a gurgling sound. Dayle was going hopefully to his car when a sudden cry froze him.

It was a strangling, terrified shout that burst from within the shack.

Dayle spun about, broke into a run. He heard next the thud of a body falling to the floor. He shouldered against the door, breaking the latch,

and just inside the shabby room he halted stiffly.

Timothy Durkee was sprawled beside the table. A half-full bottle was rolling beside him, amber liquid gushing from its neck. The glass clutched in Durkee's hand was drained, and there were wet trickling streaks on his chin. He was making feeble attempts to rise, but an overwhelming weakness held him to the floor.

A furtive sound lifted Dayle's widened eyes to a window on the opposite side of the room. It was open. The wind did not reach down into this valley, but the tall weeds growing just beyond the sill were waving. From farther beyond came a receding rustling sound. Dayle ran out again and veered in its direction.

The rattling noise in the weeds was moving toward the road that descended into the valley. It warned Dayle that a prowler was fleeing. The lamplight shafting through the shack's open door was too dim to guide him. He plunged ahead, and suddenly a black figure loomed up, a wild blow struck Dayle squarely on the forehead.

He staggered and the attacker leaped on him. Dayle's heels slid in crumbling dry dirt, throwing him off balance. As he groped blindly for support, his wide-flung arms permitted another staggering blow to crash to his face. He dropped, stunned. Rolling down the slope, he heard the weeds crackling as the prowler rushed away.

When he pulled himself up, dizzily, the valley was again a pool of silence.

Dayle ran back to the shack. Eyes stinging in the lamplight, he found Dr. Durkee still sprawled on the floor, moving even more feebly. He dropped to his knees beside the old man.

A faintly acrid smell rose with Durkee's surging breath. The odor of almonds told Dayle that while Durkee was outside the door someone had sneaked in through the window and had dropped cyanide into the bottle.

Its powerful effect was pervading the old man's lean body. His hands fastened on Dayle's arm, he pulled himself up, trying to force his voice out of his tightening throat. His words sputtered.

"Only one proof of death—one positive proof! . . . Putrefaction!"

Limply he dropped. He lay still. And gazing down at his strangely peaceful face, Dayle felt, certainly this time, the uncanny cold twinge that told him another grave must be dug.

CHAPTER IV

Please Omit Flowers

DAYLE stood tightly still in the dead man's shack, realizing that the voice of Timothy Durkee—whether or not it might have saved Alden Sellway from a living burial—was forever silenced.

Who had learned that Dayle would come here? Ruth's Aunt Caroline and Edward Rankin had heard her urge Dayle to find Dr. Durkee. Someone might have been listening outside Alden Sellway's study. "Find him, bring him!" Ruth had begged—and now the old man could no longer help her.

Dayle realized, too, that once Mike Smoot learned of Durkee's death, the inspector would take full advantage of the opportunity to crack down. He would grill Dayle, badger him, hold him as a material witness or even as an accomplice.

Certainly the inspector's tactics would choke off any further attempt Dayle might make to aid Ruth Sellway. Determined to avoid this, he circled the shabby room and opened a door c o n n e c t i n g with another in which there was a cot.

Returning to the old man, Dayle gently lifted him. He carried the corpse of Timothy Durkee to the cot, spread a blanket, then closed the door behind him.

He hurried to his car. The headlight beams lifted up the steep road. Below, the windows of the isolated shack still gleamed.

Reaching the main highway, Dayle pressed toward the city, his mind working as swiftly.

If Timothy Durkee had lived, he wondered, how would the old doctor have diagnosed Sellway's condition? As catalepsy, as Ruth hoped? If so, then Durkee had been killed by someone who desperately wished it believed that Sellway really was lifeless.

But on the other hand, Durkee might have been obliged to agree with Dr. Croft, to pronounce Sellway dead. Perhaps the murderer of Durkee knew definitely, despite Ruth's protests, that Sellway's death was a fact, that Durkee would have so stated.

In this event, then, Durkee had been killed in order to forestall his denying Ruth's claim—an act of self-protection by a person who was certain that Sellway had actually been poisoned. Only one person could be positive of this—the poisoner.

Dayle remembered Phil Thorne's disappearance from his car—recalled that Thorne's whereabouts and actions since then were unknown.

Even more sharply Dayle realized that the question of Sellway's death remained open. He could not yet be certain whether Ruth was right or wrong, whether Sellway lived or was dead. He had only one sign to follow—the failure of his instinctive reaction when approaching the door behind which Sellway lay—but it was a sign which no one else would believe or understand.

The big cylinders in the basement were still rumbling when Dayle strode into the *Item* plant. Wishing to avoid attention, Dayle went first into the washroom. The mirror showed him a trickle of red traced across his forehead. It sprang from a clean-cut break in the skin—a deep, raw spot left by the blows of the prowler.

Dayle washed the blood away and brushed the dust from his clothes. Then turning to the stairs, he saw a hand beckoning to him from an office of the advertising department.

It was the chubby hand of Artemas Cleary, Dayle's boss. Dayle found the cherubic little man frantically busy at a desk littered with proofs of department store ads.

"You're f o l l o w i n g the Sellway lead?" Cleary asked cheerfully. "Of course there'll be a card of thanks following the funeral—really an important insertion, Dayle."

"There'll be an important insertion," Dayle promised quietly, "provided, of course, that there is first a funeral."

HE LEFT Cleary to puzzle over his words. The big room at the top of the iron stairs was still humming with activity. Another edition had just come off the presses, the headline howling:

"Sellway Death Proves Previous Thorne Murder, Police Say, Promising Fugitive's Early Capture."

It stirred Dayle, making more urgent the questions he wished to ask Neal Bannon concerning the death of Hathaway Thorne two years ago. He was moving toward the city editor's desk when a girl's voice halted him.

"Mr. Dayle! Here's a call."

The telephone operator was speaking to him from the switchboard in the corner. He signaled her that he would take the call at the desk of Pat Marsh, the society editor, who was busy elsewhere at the moment. When he heard the breathless voice on the wire he eyed the operator sharply to make sure that she was not indulging in her habit of listening in.

"Den!" the voice said. "What's happening? Can you tell me? I've got to know!"

It was Phil Thorne.

Dayle countered, "Where are you?"

"In the guest cottage. Nobody else is here, and I had to get to a phone." Dayle knew that the cottage sat far back on the Sellway grounds, separated from the big house by an expanse of gardened lawn.

"I've been trying to get in touch

with Ruth, but I can't. The place is being watched. Two more men just arrived—Inspector Smoot again, and someone else. Something strange is happening, Den. What does it mean?"

"Stay where you are," Dayle said quickly. "I'm coming," and at once he disconnected.

Dayle curbed his car on a dark street two blocks from the Sellway home. His stride quick, he followed a lane that led behind the property. Pausing at a hedge, he scanned the grounds, sensing that men stationed in the shadows were keeping it under surveillance from all sides.

The big house remained quiet, its windows closely curtained. The big car sitting at the portico, Dayle saw, was Inspector Smoot's. Nearby, the guest cottage stood completely dark.

Dayle parted the hedge, making as little sound as possible, and sidled through. When he came to the cottage door he heard the knob turn and knew that Phil Thorne had seen his approach. Stepping in, he heard Thorne's quick breath in the darkness.

"What are they doing in there, Den?" Thorne asked. "Actually going so far as to think Ruth is mixed up in her father's death somehow?"

"She's in a tough spot, Phil," Dayle answered. "I've got to see her, without their knowing it, if I can. Where have you been since you left my car?"

A MOMENT of silence passed before Thorne answered. "Here," he said. "I'd already slipped out when Smoot arrived the first time, with Ruth's Uncle Edward and Aunt Caroline. A couple of detectives came with him. They moved around, and I couldn't get back to your car without their spotting me, so I had to sneak into this cottage. They're still watching, but Den, I can't let them worry Ruth. If it will make them let her alone, I'll give myself up."

Dayle gripped Thorne's arm. "Not yet. See here, Phil. There's no time to explain now, but Ruth needs you even more than you think. Perhaps we can get into the house. The garden is pretty thick between this cottage and the garage—it'll cover us. Are you willing to take the chance?"

Thorne said at once, "Certainly, Den, but you—you're asking for serious trouble. If they catch you with me—"

"Let's go."

Easing out the door, Dayle dropped to a crouch. Thorne followed him closely, bending low. They scurried to a path leading through the garden. The thick grass and the soughing of the wind covered their movements.

Keenly feeling the presence of the watching detectives, they paused beside the garage wall. The garage joined the house, and the room in the nearest corner was Alden Sellway's study. Together Dayle and Thorne crept behind the bushes until they neared a window.

There Dayle paused with a wary gesture that stopped Thorne behind him. A bank of clouds was shifting away from the moon. Its glow filtered through the foliage, flecking Dayle and Thorne. Eyes narrowed, Dayle went down on his knees to study the soft earth beneath the window.

It was marked. The tips of a man's shoes had left a group of overlapping impressions. Some of them were old, almost obliterated by recent rains. Others were newer, but even over these there was a scattering of leaves shaken from the bushes by the wind. Straightening, Dayle whispered to Thorne.

"Did you come to this window tonight?"

"No."

Dayle reached up. Passing his fingers over the glass directly in front of the window latch, he felt an arc-shaped crack and could dimly see that a semi-circular section of the pane had been cut out and fitted back into place. Transparent tape held it in position. While his mind worked, Dayle gently tapped the window.

They heard a soft gasp inside the

room. Ruth was moving toward them. The curtains parted a little. The girl saw their faces limned against the darkness, and at once drew back, startled, reaching toward the lamp. The light vanished. Then, slowly, the sash was raised.

"Phil!" Ruth whispered. "Phil!"

Dayle boosted Thorne up. He heard a glad little sob break from Ruth's lips as he followed. A smile playing across his lips, Dayle fastened the window, closed the curtains and waited a moment before turning on the light. As Thorne and Ruth drew apart, his hand clung to hers.

"Lord, it's good to be with you again, darling! Thanks to Dennis! I've been trying to find a chance to reach you, to tell you—"

Thorne broke off as he gazed into the waxy face of Alden Sellway. The man—dead or alive, Dayle still could not tell—lay on the couch exactly as before. Thorne's eyes questioned Ruth, and at that moment there was the sound of footfalls in the hall.

RUTH turned quickly to the door. The footfalls paused outside it as she put her hand over the automatic lying on the table. The commanding voice that came through was again Inspector Smoot's.

"Miss Sellway, we've given you a chance to reconsider and now your time's almost up. You've got to open that door."

Ruth blurted, "No!"

The second voice that spoke was dry and brittle.

"This is Dr. Martin, the medical examiner, Miss Sellway. Dr. Croft assures me that his tests leave no doubt as to your father's death. Respiration has ceased, there is loss of bodily heat, the conjunctiva have become completely insensitive and there is the usual lividity and flaccidity. Surely, Miss Sellway, you must concede that your father is actually dead."

"I do not believe it!"

Medical Examiner Martin's voice became stern. "The law, Miss Sellway, requires that an autopsy be performed. You have no power to refuse it. If you persist, much as we regret it, we will have to place you under arrest."

The girl said ringingly, "I will not allow you to come into this room!"

"We have decided to give you a few more minutes to think it over. If you refuse to admit us when we come back, then we shall find a way of removing your father's body."

Ruth's fingers flew to her dry lips. She stood still, listening to the footfalls again as they faded down the hall.

"I can't let them!" She turned quickly to Thorne and Dayle. "Somehow I've got to keep them away from him a little while longer. Dennis, you haven't found Dr. Durkee?"

Quietly Dayle said, "He can't come. Ruth, are you quite sure you're not mistaken?"

"I'm so terribly sure! I've already told you, Dennis, how it happened once before. Father never told anyone about it, but years ago I came across those books." She indicated several thick volumes lying open on the desk. "After recovering that first time, father bought them because he was fascinated by the thing that had happened to him. I was frightened by what I read about it, so he explained it to me. That's why I know his condition this time is the same, but deeper, more severe."

Phil Thorne was too bewildered to speak, but Dayle urged, "Go on, Ruth—quickly."

"It's the result of exhaustion," Ruth said. "Months ago father was seriously ill with pneumonia. As soon as he was up he plunged into work, because the plant had just been awarded an important defense contract. He worked so hard that he wore himself out. That's why he's fallen into this state.

"It's the supreme effort of nature to give his nerves the rest they must have. Don't you see, with all his vital processes suspended, he's really re-

covering from exhaustion, getting better with every hour that passes—and soon he'll waken again."

Thorne's eyes widened.

"Really, it's not uncommon!" Ruth hurried on. "The books say that on the average one case of catalepsy is discovered and reported every week in this country. Many more cases are not recognized—the condition is mistaken for death by even the most careful doctors. It's horrible to think that so many persons are embalmed—or buried alive—while actually still living—but it's true.

"You can understand now, surely, why I'm so anxious to save father from that. I know that if only nature is given enough time to complete her work of healing, he'll soon recover."

Thorne asked quickly, "If this is true, Ruth, is there some way of hastening it?"

DISTRAITLY she shook her head. "No, Phil. To try to revive him would only do greater harm to his over-strained nervous system. He must be allowed to keep on resting, to come out of it naturally. The most essential thing is for those around him to believe he is *not* dead, because suggestion alone can help. That's why—alone with him here—I've talked to him.

"He's conscious—subjectively but acutely conscious of everything we're saying and doing. Patients who have recovered from this condition say that they felt complete indifference to everything going on around them—indifference even to the burial preparations. Father hears me talking now, but he can't *will* himself to do anything about it. You *must* see I've got to protect him, in spite of them all!"

Dayle saw that Phil Thorne, convinced by Ruth's earnest argument, was feeling a new surge of hope.

"Listen!" Dayle said. "In a few moments they'll be coming back. They'll break in, Ruth—overpower you. We can't leave your father here!"

In silence they exchanged a message of grim decision. Dayle reached for the light. As the snap of the switch brought darkness, he moved to the window, pulled the curtains apart, quietly lifted the sash.

Dayle crawled out first. With his heavy burden he crept behind the bushes. Ruth came close behind him, and Thorne, now understanding Dayle's plan, opened the garage door a few inches. Sellway's limousine was in its stall. They moved toward it—and heard a violent thumping sound inside the house.

Inspector Smoot was forcing his way through the locked door of the study.

Dayle took the wheel of the limousine. Ruth was in the seat behind him, her father now lying at her feet. Thorne was at the garage doors, keeping them shut, waiting. Dayle touched the starter button and the engine caught. Through its noise they heard a loud crash.

Smoot had broken into the study. His hoarse shout rose. It was echoed by rustling movements in the darkness shrouding the grounds. The detectives were running toward the study windows. Hearing them coming near, Dayle engaged the gears.

"Now, Phil!"

Thorne pushed the doors wide. At the same moment Dayle sent the limousine forward. As it swung out, Thorne leaped upon the running board. He sidled into the car while Dayle sent it along the drive, lights out. The detectives shouted as it streaked past them. Dayle sent it careening through the gate, its tires singing.

CHAPTER V

Ghost with a Gun

DAYLE switched off the headlamps. Locust Hollow was dark again except for the yellow gleam in the shack windows. Thorne helped Dayle carry the body of Alden Sellway—dead or living, they could not yet know. Ruth hurried ahead to open the way into the unkempt room where

Timothy Durkee had died. They lowered Sellway to a couch.

Dayle said softly, "They might look for us here, Ruth. The inspector heard you ask me to find Dr. Durkee. But at least it will take time."

They had fled from the city at top speed, cutting through lonely dirt roads, certain that Inspector Smoot had sent out a radio alarm. The searching prowl cars were only part of the danger. The removal of Sellway's body was a serious criminal offense in itself—if Sellway were actually dead.

Gazing at his masklike face, Dayle added, "If they do find us here, Ruth, there'll be only one more thing we can do for your father's sake. Hold them off, if we can. You had a gun. Did you leave it at the house?"

Ruth dropped to her knees beside her father and said, "I brought it, Dennis, but left it in the car."

At once Dayle strode out. Phil Thorne followed him to the limousine. He snapped on the domelight, leaned into the rear seat, and after a moment of searching lifted his eyes warily to Thorne's.

"The gun is not here, Phil."

"But Ruth said—"

"It's gone!"

Dayle and Thorne gazed into the black depths of the valley. The stream murmured and the weeds stirred with a rustling sound that might conceal the movements of someone hiding among them. To search, Dayle knew, would be futile. He grasped Thorne's arm and they turned back to the shack. Ruth looked up hopelessly as they stepped in.

"Watch sharp, Phil," Dayle warned. "Someone may be outside—someone who wants to make certain of Sellway's death."

Tensely Thorne nodded. "We're grateful, Dennis. Running a stiff chance, helping us like this, you've shown us you're the only friend we have left. I want you to know that I believe what Ruth says about her father. Even though it would prove I didn't kill him, I'll do everything possible to keep them from taking him to—to the morgue."

Dayle moved to the door. "I'm going back. In town I may be able to learn what Smoot means to do now, and how close he is to finding you. Meanwhile, Ruth, try to get some rest. Phil will watch. I'll relieve you, Phil, as soon as I can."

As he closed the door Thorne sank the bolt into its socket. Sending the limousine up the steep road and turning it toward the city, he could not forget that Ruth's gun had disappeared—that now it was held in a hidden hand. . . .

PROWL cars were still searching for the limousine. Dodging through an outlying residential district, Dayle swung it into the driveway of a small apartment building. Emerging from the parking lot on foot, he walked until, coming into the downtown section of the suburb, he found a taxi driver dozing at a corner.

While the cab carried him into the city proper, he planned. He had left his own car near the Sellway home. Since it might be found by the searching cops, he knew he must remove it as soon as possible. Even more important, however, was Inspector Smoot's strategy. In search of news, Dayle left the taxi in front of the *Item* building.

The pressure in the city room had relented. The deadline of the final was not yet at hand, and the staff was enjoying a brief breathing spell. Dayle went to Neal Bannon's desk, taking up a fresh copy of the *Item* and poring over the headlines that attributed not one but two murders to Phil Thorne.

"Something breaking in the Sellway case, Neal?" he asked as casually as he could.

"Plenty!" Bannon answered. "The signs say there's hell to pay, but that's all I know—no details. Smoot's turned as ugly as a starved bear, which means it's going to be tough

as the very devil on somebody. But he's not talking yet."

Dayle smiled but offered no explanation. He asked, instead, "But how is the death of Hathaway Thorne two years ago tied onto Phil?"

"When Phil Thorne's Uncle Hathaway popped off," Bannon said, "it looked like suicide. Smoot doubted it—the setup smelled suspicious. He went to work on both Thorne brothers. Roger's pretty wild, in a quiet way, and likes to live high, but Phil needed money even worse, for his aeronautical lab.

"Well, Phil inherited the greater part of the estate because his uncle wanted to encourage his work—twenty thousand, while the kid brother got only five. That gave Phil the stronger motive—if it was murder. Smoot cracked down on him, but couldn't prove a case."

The several photos printed in the *Item's* latest edition, Dayle saw, pictured Phil Thorne's lab—a small hangar on a grassy field outside the city limits. An interior view showed a model plane equipped with the new wing of radical design which Thorne had created after years of experiment.

Dayle recalled that the death of Phil Thorne's Uncle Hathaway had occurred at a crisis in Phil's work, when otherwise a lack of funds would have forced him to abandon the project.

"An autopsy revealed that the uncle had died from drinking bouillon doped with cyanide," Bannon went on while Dayle listened intently. "A suicide note was found and Smoot thought it was a forgery. The graphology experts disagreed among themselves, but that didn't stop Smoot. He's as tenacious as a bulldog—never lets go.

"He kept the Hathaway Thorne case open—kept worrying it, creeping a little closer to the answer, carrying on a sort of private war of nerves. Now he's staging a blitz. The Sellway case is an exact parallel to the other, and it all adds up to plenty."

"Then you believe Phil Thorne is guilty in both cases."

"The evidence makes it as sure as death and taxes," Bannon answered. "The first time, a tin can containing some potassium cyanide was found buried near Thorne's workshop. This time, following the identical pattern, another can of cyanide was dug up—about an hour ago, in fact. Even before it was found, Smoot proved that Thorne had bought the poison."

"But Phil took hundreds of pictures as a means of developing his data," Dayle pointed out. "Pictures of smokestreams formed around the new wing he tried out in his miniature wind tunnel. He had to have the cyanide in his darkroom. Someone else might have sneaked the stuff out."

BANNON smiled. "Considering each of the two cases separately, you can guess at half a dozen answers. Either Roger or Phil might have spiked their Uncle Hathaway's bouillon. In Sellway's case, several people stand to gain under his will—his daughter Ruth most of all, his sister Caroline, his brother-in-law Edward, and Phil Thorne indirectly—not to mention Dr. Croft."

"Croft!"

"Sellway has left a bag of money to the East Side Clinic. For years Croft has been devoting himself to building it up and lately it's been staggering from lack of equipment and too small a staff. Well—"

"Wait," Dayle said quickly. "Anthony Croft was also Hathaway Thorne's doctor."

"Yes, but what did he get out of Hathaway Thorne's death? Nothing! Well, take your choice of the suspects. But when you consider the two cases together—" Bannon shook his head.

Hard hit by the force of this reasoning, Dayle said, "You mean Phil is the only real link between them."

"Absolutely. Remember that only two persons gained by Hathaway Thorne's death—Roger and Phil."

Dayle studied the pictures of the brother printed in this latest edition. That of Roger, taken three years or so ago, showed that he had lately acquired a lean, harried look, while Phil had changed hardly at all.

"But Sellway's death doesn't benefit Roger by so much as a plugged nickel," Bannon continued, "while Phil—good lord! He'd be hitting the jackpot right now if he weren't on the lam as a killer. You can't get away from it, Den—two different times Phil Thorne used poison to get himself out of a desperate money jam."

Dayle's face was set in a numbed expression that caused Bannon to wag his head again as he turned back to his work.

"Did you have some idea that your pal Phil Thorne might be innocent? Forget it, Den, forget it!" Then Bannon's head lifted with an alarming thought. "If you've any idea of helping him out of this, don't even try it! Not unless you want to find Smoot handing you a murder rap right along with Thorne."

Another cab brought Dayle to an intersection on Sycamore Drive. Dismissing it, he walked along the quiet street, several blocks from the Sellway home, where he had left his car. He watched it for several cautious moments, saw nothing to hint that it was being spotted, then quickly strode forward again.

He slid under the wheel, started the motor and was about to swing from the curb when a voice froze him—a voice that rumbled behind his back.

"Drive to headquarters, Jack."

Rigidly Dayle peered into the rear-view mirror. There was a ghost in it—the tall white hat of Inspector Smoot. It told Dayle that his car had been found soon after he had helped spirit the body of Alden Sellway out of the city.

With tenacious patience Smoot had been watching for him to return to it. The inspector was sitting deep in the corner of the rear seat, his eyes narrowed viciously.

"You h e a r d me, Jack. Drive straight to headquarters. You're going to be staying there a while."

Dayle's only choice was to obey. The sting of Smoot's gaze caused the hairs to prickle on the back of his neck. He slowly turned the car from the curb, hands hard on the wheel, knowing that the inspector was armed and watching for him to make a false move.

"That's r i g h t, Jack," Smoot drawled. "Take it easy. You've got lots of time—all the time in the world."

THE center of the city lay before Dayle as he drove. A few more blocks would bring him into the retail district where the street lights were bright, where any attempt Dayle might make to escape Smoot would be most dangerous.

Police headquarters was not far beyond. Once inside it, Dayle knew, he would be grilled without mercy, held as an accomplice after the fact of first-degree murder. A few more blocks. . . .

At the next street crossing Dayle spun the wheel. The car careened into a sharp U-turn. Peering into the mirror, Dayle saw Smoot thrown sideward. Instantly he was dragging on the hand-brake, twisting up, flinging himself over the back of the seat.

He fell on Smoot. The inspector was struggling up, pulling out his service revolver. Dayle struck it aside, drove his fists to the blunt point of Smoot's chin. Smoot went limp, the gun slipping from his loose fingers.

Dayle thrust it into his pocket, peering around. The street was deserted; no one had seen. Stooping again, he fished into Smoot's hip pocket, and this time when he straightened he had Smoot's handcuffs.

The inspector began to stir as Dayle dragged him out. Prodding him with the gun, Dayle forced him into the driver's seat. Two clicks sounded as he locked the handcuffs—one steel cir-

cle clamped about Smoot's wrist, the other fastened to the steering-wheel.

Sitting in the rear seat, Dayle pointed the inspector's gun and saw Smoot's eyes slitted at him in the mirror.

"You're doing the driving now, inspector," Dayle said, smiling tightly. "Do it carefully. Keep quiet—your eyes on the road, and follow directions."

Smoot said thickly, "Just as you say, Jack. The more charges I can pile up against you, the better I'll like it."

His obedience, as he followed Dayle's orders, was ominous. He made no protest as Dayle directed him toward the city limits. A prowl car crept up beside him once and Smoot turned his head, but said nothing. The patrolmen, recognizing him, saluted and proceeded.

Dayle felt that Smoot was biding his time, waiting for the tables to turn. Letting Dayle give him an excuse to retaliate ruthlessly, he complied with every word Dayle spoke, until at last they were winding through the dry hills, descending toward Locust Hollow.

"Stop here," Dayle said.

Smoot braked. The car was high on the rim of the valley. A precipitous bank, covered with rank-growing weeds, lay on its right. The headlamp beams streaked down the steep stretch of road that turned below to the shack of Dr. Durkee, which remained out of sight. Smoot eyed Dayle with a peculiar triumphant glint, as if he sensed that the end of the hunt was near.

The gun aimed, Dayle eased from the car. His free hand reached into the front window past Smoot. When he withdrew it, holding the key, the headlamps and the ignition were turned off and the gears were locked in reverse.

"You won't mind waiting, inspector," Dayle said grimly.

He tossed the revolver to the seat beside Smoot, then ducked around the rear of the car. Quick movements warned him that Smoot had snatched up the weapon. The inspector switched the headlamps back on, but the glare did not reach Dayle. He was over the edge of the bank, digging his heels into dry dirt, working his way down through the weedy jungle.

AS HE reached the floor of the valley the shine of the car disappeared. Smoot had decided to wait in darkness, hoping that Dayle's moves would betray him into making a target of himself. Lips quirked, Dayle knew that Smoot would touch the switch again—the switch and the trigger—at the first suspicious sound near the car. With no intention of giving the inspector that opportunity, Dayle hurried to the shack.

He knocked and said, "It's Dennis!"

The bolt clicked out of its socket and Phil Thorne opened the door. Thorne's constant vigilance had worn him. Dayle paused just inside the door, gazing at Ruth and the still figure of the man on the couch.

Shaking his head, Thorne murmured, "She's losing hope, Den. It's been so long now."

The girl was sitting on the floor, her head resting on the couch, one of her hands clasping the unresponsive hand of her father.

Dayle listened a moment, then turned to Thorne. "You remember what Ruth said? If the condition is not really death—if it is catalepsy—he's aware of us now. All along he's been conscious of everything said and done near him. You realize what that means, Phil? If Alden Sellway is really alive, he knows who tried to murder him."

Thorne's wan face grew even paler.

"If he's alive he knows," Dayle insisted. "Picture the way it must have happened. Sellway went into his study to take his customary nap before dinner. While he lay there, his exhausted nerves rebelled and this condition took hold of him.

"When you stepped in to talk with him, Phil, you thought he was asleep, and you went away again without trying to disturb him, but actually he'd dropped into a cataleptic trance. He was still lying there like that when those poisoned capsules were dropped into the bottle on the table near his head—and he knew it was being done, knew who was doing it."

Ruth remained as motionless as her father while Thorne listened intently.

"The guilty person had planned it all in advance. Previously—at night, no doubt, when the study was empty, so that it could be done secretly—that person had come to the outside of the window. Using a glass-cutter, it was easy to remove a section of the pane directly in front of the latch. Afterward it was held in place again with transparent tape.

"These preparations made, the guilty person next made use of some empty capsules bought at a drug store. Intending to incriminate you, that person took the can of cyanide from your darkroom and filled the capsules with it. Then the plan was complete."

Dayle turned his head, listening again before he went on.

"The guilty person came back to the study window, loosened the section of glass, unlatched the sash, raised it. Sellway's bottle of medicinal capsules was within reach. The other capsules containing poison could then be added to them without the murderer's having to enter the room. Once this was done, the sash was lowered, latched again, the section of glass replaced. It was a shrewd scheme—except for one thing."

Thorne's gaze turned quickly to Ruth as she lifted her head.

"Except for one thing the plan would have worked," Dayle went on rapidly. "Alden Sellway never swallowed one of those capsules. He'd already succumbed to the cataleptic spell. The person who wanted to kill him did not know that. But Sellway knew that the attempt had been made."

"Do you actually mean that if he recovers he'll be able to name the person who tried to murder him?"

"He will."

A quick breath burst from Ruth's lips. Her hands tightened on her father's. She looked up at Dayle and Thorne with new hope.

"It—it's warmer!" she exclaimed softly. "His hand has been so cold, but now—"

DAYLE bent over Alden Sellway, pressed his fingers to Sellway's wrist. Thorne stood tensely at his shoulder. They watched Sellway's waxlike face for long moments. At last Dayle slowly shook his head.

"I thought I felt a very weak pulse, but I must have been mistaken. There's none now."

Ruth's hands remained clasped on her father's, her eyes still shining with hope, as Dayle strode across the room and back.

"Listen, Phil. I've been thinking it out. It's a strange thing to say, but once Sellway was pronounced dead by Dr. Croft, the murderer wanted him to stay dead. Sellway's death was very necessary to someone. Why? Well, it would bring money not only to Ruth, and to you through her, Phil, but also to her Aunt Caroline, her Uncle Edward and to Dr. Croft. But that's only part of it. The most important element is the murderer's attempt to frame you, Phil.

"The frame had two purposes. Gain was one, because your rights in your new wing would pass on if you were sent to the chair, but that's secondary. The other is far more important. By making you seem guilty of Sellway's death, the murderer also made you seem guilty of Hathaway Thorne's death two years ago—and thereby he cleared himself!"

"But that first case was dropped!"

"By no means," Dayle answered. "Inspector Smoot never stopped working on it. He'd never give up until he

learned the truth, and the killer knew it—was haunted day and night by Smoot's relentlessness, until finally the strain became too much to bear.

"He had to shake off Smoot somehow, or go mad—because he knew he'd sooner or later get caught—knew that Smoot's ruthless methods would inevitably force a confession out of him. In order to escape that, he had to kill again, in such a way as to fasten both killings on you, Phil. There can be no other answer, and as for proof—though you won't understand it—here it is."

Dayle pointed to the deep raw spot on his forehead.

"A mark left by the stone of a ring," he said. "A mark left when—"

Ruth cried out: "Phil! Phil!"

Dayle and Thorne turned quickly to the couch. They stared at Alden Sellway. There was a flicker on Sellway's eyelids—faint, almost indiscernible, but undeniably a twitching of tiny muscles. There was a slow surging of breath in Sellway's chest. There was warmth in his body. Dayle could feel it rising now, as he pressed his fingers to Sellway's wrist and felt a definite, strengthening pulse.

Ruth called, "Father, father!"

The report was as sudden and shattering as a lightning bolt. It roared into the tense silence of the shack. At the same instant a hole appeared in the faded upholstery directly above the living body of Alden Sellway—the puncture of the bullet.

Particles of glass flew as Dayle spun about, and he saw the broken pane in the window on the opposite side of the room—saw a phantom figure hovering outside, the glitter of the leveled automatic.

Dayle's movements were a swift, continuous stream. He caught up a chair, swung it overhead, flung it toward the man whose desperate purpose was to silence Sellway. It twirled into the window. More glass smashed.

Still moving, Dayle struck at the lamp. The chimney toppled off and Dayle's breath puffed out the wick. Blackness filled the room—but blackness broken by the swift coppery flashes at the window as the automatic spat again and again.

Dayle was pulling Alden Sellway off the couch. He felt Sellway moving, trying to get up. Grasping Ruth's arm he raised his voice.

"He's hit—hit in the temple! I feel the blood! He's dead!"

HIS words were aimed at the window. Ruth's sharp cry underscored them. Dayle pulled her down, brought his lips close to her ear.

"It's not true! Your father's all right. I wanted that man—the man at the window—to believe he'd succeeded. It was a way to stop his firing. Listen!"

There were swift sounds in the weeds. Dayle jumped up, found the door, jerked it wide. The rustling noises were moving toward the steep road, the only quick way out of the valley. Keeping in the clear, Dayle ran in the same direction. He heard the killer racing up the slope. Suddenly the man with the gun was outlined sharply against a glare of light.

In the car at the top of the hill Inspector Smoot had switched on the headlamps. Their shafts impaled the figure on the road above Dayle. The man stopped, terrified, lifting the stolen automatic. In blind frenzy he fired at the dazzling lights. His bullets clanged into the car and one of the headlamps vanished in a shattering burst.

The shots were echoed by the revolver in Smoot's hand. There were four swift flashes. The man in the light staggered, dropped to his knees. As he rolled in the dust Dayle moved aside, out of the light. And he saw a scarlet twinkle—the blood-red glitter of the ruby ring on the fallen man's hand.

Smoot's voice roared down. "Dayle! Open these cuffs! Open them!"

Ignoring him, Dayle strode back to the shack. Darkness still lay inside the open door. There was a confusion

of voices while Dayle found the lamp.

"Yes—yes, I knew!" Alden Sellway's tone was tired but firm. "I heard the study window opened, the bottle moved. I smelled him—recognized the scent that always clung to him. I knew—it was—"

Sellway's voice faded as the flame reached high from the wick, filling the shack with a yellow glow. Alden Sellway had risen. Ruth's head was on his shoulder; she was sobbing, and one of his arms was clasped around her.

As Dayle watched, smiling, Sellway's other hand g r i p p e d Phil Thorne's. Their eyes turned to Dayle.

"You know?" Sellway asked.

"It was Roger Thorne," Dayle said. . . .

THE man who had been pronounced dead went to the door on which the wreath hung. It brought a dour smile to Alden Sellway's lips. Ruth was at his side, and Phil Thorne opened the way. Dayle had followed them from the car, and Inspector Smoot, hard-faced, dogged Dayle's steps. There were voices in the living room—voices that ceased as Sellway appeared.

With Dayle at the wheel, they had driven from Locust Hollow to police headquarters. Roger Thorne had been taken under guard to a hospital where his bullet wounds would be treated. Two former charges of homicide were being lodged against him. The third man whom Roger Thorne had attempted to poison looked strong and refreshed as he entered the room where his own funeral service was to have been held.

The casket, closed now, still rested among the banked flowers, and again the flames of the tall candles drifted in the air. Sellway's sister Caroline, her husband, Edward Rankin, and Dr. Anthony Croft were present. They were struck with silence as Sellway gazed at them.

"Don't stare at me as if I were a ghost," Sellway said. "I've had a wonderful rest—never felt better in my life! But you—I must say the three of you look a trifle disappointed. I know very well that while I lay there in that coffin you thought of me only in terms of the money I had bequeathed to you. Now I know exactly what I'm going to do about you three—vultures."

While Sellway spoke Dayle could feel the ominous nearness of Inspector Smoot.

"You, Caroline, and you, Edward—you've lived off me much too long. Pack your things and go. As for you, Doctor Croft—p l e a s e leave this house! The next time I die, you'll find my will quite a different sort of document. It'll leave everything to my daughter and her husband. Meanwhile I'm sure the three of us—Ruth, Phil and I—will be very happy living here together."

Ruth's eyes shone and her hand clasped Phil's as Dr. Croft indignantly strode out. With a sniff Caroline Rankin and her chagrined husband followed him. Still smiling, Sellway closed the door on them, and when he returned he was carrying the black wreath he had brought from it.

"Please call the mortician, Phil," he suggested wryly, "and have him remove that casket and those hideous flowers—and this!"

Tossing the wreath upon the empty coffin, he turned to Smoot. "You could make considerable trouble for Dennis Dayle, inspector, but I hope you won't choose to do so. If you do, I'm sure the *Item* will be glad to print a statement from me explaining just how eager you were to persecute an innocent young man—and bury me alive."

Smoot put on a hurt expression. "Why, you got me wrong, Mr. Sellway," he drawled. "I was just playing along with Dayle, so he could have a chance to straighten it out. Knowing he's a smart lad, sir, I—I wanted to give him a helping hand."

"I'm sure he did, Mr. Sellway,"

Dayle said, his smile growing. "In fact, I'm going down to the plant now to tell the city editor that we'd have gotten nowhere without the inspector's co-operation. Good night."

Ruth's eyes and Phil's flashed him a message of gratitude. Smoot's glacial glare, he felt, as he turned to the door, was still threatening. Reminding himself that the inspector's dogged vindictiveness might sooner or later catch up with him despite Sellway's intervention, he hurried out the door on which the wreath no longer hung.

He was still hurrying when he went into the *Item* building. He knew that in the city room Neal Bannon was impatiently waiting for the startling news he was bringing. He also had news for Pat Marsh, the society editor—the first announcement that Phil Thorne and Ruth Sellway were soon to be married. But he delayed a moment in order to respond to a signal from his boss, cherubic Artemus Cleary, who was wagging a hand at him.

"You have the Sellway insertions?" Cleary asked excitedly. Busy with his department store ads, he apparently had not heard of the break in the case. "The card of thanks and the rest—you have them?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," Dayle said. "I feel it wouldn't be quite proper to solicit my kind of business from a man who's still living. But I have another notice—an important one concerning another man who died tonight. It will remind the city that his is a name to be remembered with respect. It's Timothy Durkee—*Doctor* Timothy Durkee."

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Never to Wake Again!

Sensational Novelet *By Emile C. Tepperman*

One after another, the victims of a vengeance-ridden killer were attacked by a strange malady before meeting their ultimate doom. And when Pete Alexander, famed mystery writer, sought to unravel the baffling enigma, he found that the enfolding arms of Morpheus were tightening around him in a lethal embrace.

AT SEVEN-THIRTY in the morning on the seventh of May, Amos Beckett stepped out of his cold shower. He was glowing with vitality.

He rubbed himself down briskly with a huge Turkish towel. Then he shaved and dressed. His wife was waiting for him at the breakfast table.

Amos Beckett was a prosperous business man, and a hearty eater. He had hot cereal, two medium-boiled eggs, four strips of bacon, three slices of toast, and two cups of coffee.

He looked through the morning paper while he ate.

His wife nibbled a piece of toast, and read her own copy of the paper. "Did you see that headline, Amos?" she asked. "Luther Wiggins died in his sleep last night. They say it was his heart. Weren't you in business with him many years ago?"

Amos Beckett was reading the very news item to which his wife referred.

"Ahem," he said. "Yes." He went on reading intently.

"There seems to be an epidemic of heart cases," his wife persisted. "I think you ought to go and see a doctor, Amos. You're getting on toward fifty, you know, and a health examination wouldn't hurt you."

"Er—what's that? Oh, yes. Health examination. Certainly, dear. I'll think about it."

Mr. Beckett appeared to be somewhat absent-minded. He put down the paper, yawned, and reached for the mail which the maid had placed alongside the plate.

MRS. BECKETT looked worried. "I declare, Amos! You're yawning! And you went to bed before ten last night. You shouldn't be sleepy. You work too hard, dear—"

She broke off at a sudden exclamation from her husband. He suddenly crumpled a letter he had been reading. His face was very white.

"Why, Amos! What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing to worry about. Just an impertinent fellow." He thrust the crumpled sheet, and its accompanying envelope, into his pocket.

However, in spite of his reassurance that it was nothing to worry about, Mrs. Beckett watched her husband worriedly from the window as he hurried down the street toward the subway station.

He waved to her from the corner, and descended into the subway kiosk. The downtown platform was heavily crowded. Beckett put a penny into one of the slot machines and extracted his daily package of gum. He then inserted two more pennies for two extra packages. He chewed gum after each meal, as it was his belief that this aided digestion.

Then he made his way through the crowd to the edge of the platform, alongside the magazine stand. He went through this routine performance every morning, five days a week. He always stood at the same spot on the platform, because it would take him out near the exit at the Wall Street station where his law office was located.

The rumble of the approaching train was audible in the tunnel, but Beckett was preoccupied. Several times he brushed his hand across his eyes as if he were sleepy. With his other hand he kept fingering the crumpled letter in his pocket.

His eyes kept closing, and he kept forcing them open. His face was gray. There was terror in his eyes. He swayed a little on his feet, and stumbled against the man beside him. His head drooped. Then his body sagged in the middle, and he fell forward.

Later, some one in the crowd said that Beckett had been *pushed.*

But whether he fell or was pushed, the result was the same. He struck the track just as the southbound express came roaring into the station. The motorman saw him too late. Brakes squealed. Women screamed. Chaos followed. But it was all the same to Amos Beckett.

It took almost an hour to extract his crushed and mangled body from under the train. Service on the East Side subway was completely disrupted. . . .

AS a result of this traffic tie-up, Lenore Simpson did not get to work at the offices of Wiggins & Carter until nine-fifty. She hurried breathlessly from the station, because Arnold Wiggins, the senior partner of the old private banking firm, was a stickler for promptness. She knew that the death of Luther Wiggins, Arnold's cousin, would not keep her employer from the office. For there had been no love lost between the two cousins.

She reached the entrance to the Traders' Building on Wall Street and hurried through into the ornate ground-floor banking offices. She saw that Mr. Arnold Wiggins' big limousine was parked at the curb, which meant that her employer was already there.

The bodyguard who always accompanied Arnold Wiggins from home to office would come out soon, and be driven to the home of the junior partner, Eric Carter, whom the bodyguard would then escort down to the office.

The same procedure was followed in the evening. In this way the two partners of Wiggins & Carter economized by using only one bodyguard.

As Lenore Simpson looked back to the curb where the limousine was parked, she saw something else, which caused her, for no particular reason, to feel highly uneasy.

It was the sight of another car, just behind the limousine. This car was all black, and there was a chauffeur at the wheel who sat stiff as a ramrod and stared straight ahead. Upon the chauffeur's right cheek there was a dark round blotch about the size of a quarter.

She saw all this in passing. The thing that made her shudder was the momentary glimpse she had of the man who sat within the car. She couldn't see much, but she got the impression of a huge, repulsively fat man—of a face so round and padded with flesh that it was impossible to distinguish the eyes; and of a pendulous under-lip and a pair of pudgy fingers plucking at it.

This fat and repulsive face was close to the window, but when the man saw that Lenore Simpson had glimpsed him, he withdrew hurriedly.

Lenore crossed the banking floor and mounted to the balcony where the executive offices were located. Several of the clerks greeted her almost fawningly, because she was the private secretary to Mr. Arnold Wiggins, and they entertained the notion that she might have some influence with him as to promotions.

Lenore opened the door of the private office. She had a little anteroom here, and at the left of her desk was the door to the president's inner sanctum. She rapped at the door, then pushed it open to report to Wiggins the cause of her lateness.

She looked into the room and frowned. Mr. Arnold Wiggins was asleep at his desk, with his head on his arms. But what was even more astounding was the sight of Joe Kleeber, the bodyguard—asleep on the floor!

The two men were in such natural positions that it never entered her head that they were not merely asleep. But where did Joe Kleeber get the nerve to go to sleep on the floor? If Mr. Wiggins woke up first and saw Joe, there would be a new bodyguard on the job tomorrow. And she wouldn't like to see Joe fired, because he was a married man and needed the job.

So she tiptoed in and bent down and shook Joe Kleeber softly.

"Wake up, Joe!" she whispered. "What's the matter with you—"

And then her voice broke and changed into a scream. Because when she shook him, Joe's head lolled back, with the eyes closed. And his hands flapped limply on the floor.

Horrified, she sprang up—and inadvertently bumped into Mr. Arnold Wiggins' chair.

Mr. Wiggins' head slid off the desk.

His body slid off the chair. And he fell to the floor with a thump.

Lenore Simpson's second scream was still echoing when the clerks came running in.

It was not till the police came that the actual cause of death was discovered. There was a tiny hole in the back of each man's coat, just above the heart. There had been virtually no bleeding.

"It looks," said the medical examiner, "as if they were stabbed with a hatpin. Only I haven't seen a hatpin in five years. They don't wear them any more."

"And they were stabbed," said Lieutenant Nimrod of Homicide, "while they slept. Now ain't that a dandy? Any one of fifty people coming in and out of this place could have walked in and given them the works—just two quick jabs. But why the devil should they have gone to sleep like that, in the middle of the morning?"

SIX blocks away from the offices of Wiggins & Carter—and eight blocks from the office of the defunct Mr. Amos Beckett—is the *Chronicle* Building.

At the moment when the police lieutenant was asking that question, the clerk at the classified advertising desk of the *Chronicle* was raising his eyebrows as he read the form which a girl with copper-colored hair had just handed him. It read as follows:

WANTED—young man who suffers from INSOMNIA. Must be unmarried and have no family ties. Dangerous work, but good pay. Apply at once. Brenda Carter, Penthouse, Park Vale Towers.

"Insomnia!" said the clerk. "You ought to ask in a hospital—"

"When will this ad appear?" Brenda Carter demanded.

"The first edition of the evening paper goes on the stands shortly after noon," the clerk told her.

She paid for the ad, and left quickly. Outside, she climbed into a blue sport roadster at the curb, and drove swiftly uptown to the Park Vale Towers. She ascended in a private elevator to the duplex penthouse apartment, and was admitted by a maid.

"Your father is in his study, Miss Carter. He has the door locked, and will admit no one till you return."

Brenda Carter nodded and hurried up the short flight of stairs, and knocked at her father's door. There was a shuffling step within, and then a hoarse voice demanded, "Who?"

"It's I, dad."

There was a grunt. A lock clicked, a chair slid over, and the door opened.

Eric Carter, the junior partner of Wiggins & Carter, was ordinarily a tall and handsome man. This morning he was unshaven and bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. He wore a wrinkled smoking jacket over his suspenders. He was tightly gripping a Smith & Wesson thirty-two in his right hand.

He admitted Brenda and closed the door quickly behind her.

"I've put the ad in the paper, dad!" she said breathlessly. "If we can get some one who won't fall asleep—"

She stopped, seeing the hopeless look in her father's eyes.

"What's the use, Brenda? I just got a phone call. Arnold was just killed in the office. And Joe Kleeber, too. They were asleep when they were killed. And Amos Beckett, also. He was crushed by a subway train!"

Brenda Carter's eyes opened wide. "Then—then we're next, dad?"

Eric Carter met his daughter's level gaze, and nodded. He motioned toward a serving table in a corner.

"I had an electric stove put in here. And I've stocked up with coffee and canned goods—and caffeine tablets. We'll sit here and take turns at staying awake—and fight off the sleep with coffee."

"But what about the police, dad? Why not call them?"

Eric Carter laughed hollowly. "After you left this morning, Brenda, I called police headquarters. They sent me a plainclothes detective."

He took her by the arm and led her to a small alcove where there was a folding bed. A man lay on the bed, sound asleep. He was breathing deeply and regularly. His coat was hanging loose, revealing a badge pinned to his vest.

"There's the detective," Eric said grimly. "He went to sleep fifteen minutes ago. I haven't been able to wake him up."

Brenda gasped.

Eric Carter's voice grew shrill as he rushed on.

"It's ghastly. Dreadful! He doesn't threaten, he doesn't bargain. After all these years, his hate must be a terrible thing. He'll kill us all in our sleep. And all we can do is sit and wait, and drink coffee to keep awake. If only I could get in touch with him somehow—I'd offer him everything I own in the world—"

Carter broke off with a sob. "If he'd only spare you, Brenda, I'd be willing to die. But to know that we'll both fall asleep—"

She pressed his arm. "Chin up, dad. Maybe someone will answer the ad. If we could only get someone who can't fall asleep . . ."

PETE ALEXANDER fussed around in bed, tossing from one side to the other. At last he reached for a cigarette on the night table beside his bed, and lit it. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his cheeks were gaunt and shrunken.

He kicked the sheet off him, and got up. There was a fifth of rye on the dresser, about three-quarters empty. He lifted it to his mouth, and took a terrific gulp.

Then he went and looked at himself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. The pajamas hung in folds from his body. He looked terrible.

"If I could only get some sleep!" he muttered. He looked at the wrist watch on the dresser. It was after noontime, but it was quite dark in the room, for he had the Venetian blinds tightly shut to keep the sun out.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers and picked up the phone.

"Get me Doctor Menzies, please," he told the hotel switchboard operator.

In a moment, he was talking to the house physician.

"Menzies, you've got to do something for me. I haven't slept for a week. I stayed out playing cards all last night, and went to bed at nine o'clock this morning. I've drunk two cases of rye whiskey, and an assortment of cocktails. But I'm still awake. Damn it, isn't there anything else you can give me?"

"You're certainly a unique case," said the doctor. "I was talking about you with a friend of mine on one of the big hospital staffs. He gave me a new drug that he's perfected, for insomnia. Come on down and I'll administer it."

Pete showered and dressed hastily, and hurried down to the second floor, where the house physician's office was located.

Doctor Menzies had a hypodermic ready.

"This is a damned powerful drug, Mr. Alexander," he said. "In an ordinary case, I'd hesitate to administer it. The effects have been terrific in all the experiments. One man slept for eight days after an injection of fifty cc. That's the dose I'm going to give you."

He swabbed off Pete's arm, thrust in the hypo needle, then drove home the plunger.

Pete sighed. "Boy, would I like to sleep for eight days! How much do I owe you, Doc?"

Menzies waved the checkbook away. "Let's see how it works, first. It should begin taking effect within five or six hours. If it's successful, you can donate five hundred dollars to the clinic in my friend's hospital."

"I'll double it!" said Pete Alexander.

He dressed and went out.

"Better see that you're near your bed in about five hours," Menzies called after him. "You may keel over in sleep, without any notice."

Pete walked down the flight of stairs to the lobby, feeling like a wreck. He was dead tired, but wide awake.

Alec, the doorman, said respectfully, "Hello, Mr. Alexander. Can't you get to sleep yet?"

"I'd give ten grand for twenty-four hours' sleep!" Pete growled.

He started to get into a cab at the curb when Alec, who was holding the door open for him, said facetiously, "It's too bad you don't need a job, Mr. Alexander. Here's one you'd qualify for."

He had a paper folded over at the want ad section, and he put his finger on one of the insertions.

Pete scowled, but stopped and read it:

WANTED—young man who suffers from INSOMNIA . . .

Pete's eyes began to glitter.

"Take me to the Park Vale Towers!" he ordered the cab driver.

Few people knew just how Pete Alexander made his money. He lived well, spent well, and seemed to have plenty of leisure. All sorts of rumors were rife about him. Some said he had inherited a small share in the Kimberley Diamond Mines, others said that he was tied up with the policy racket.

Only Pete's intimate friends knew that he made fabulous sums of money by writing mystery novels. He had begun writing when he finished college, and through some perverse idea he had chosen the pen name of Jacob Jones. Ten best sellers under that name had swept the public off its feet, and all had sold to the movies for fantastic sums. And only a very few intimates connected Pete Alexander with Jacob Jones, the writer.

But there was one unfortunate situation which had resulted from Pete Alexander's success. It was this insomnia. He had contracted the habit of working at night. Five nights a week, between midnight and dawn, he would work at his typewriter. This had become a habit, and now he found that he couldn't sleep at night at all. What was worse, he suddenly discovered that it was impossible for him to sleep in the daytime, either.

So here he was, a confirmed insomniac, on his way to answer a fantastic advertisement.

At least, he thought sourly, if he couldn't sleep he might be able to pick up material for another mystery book.

TWO blocks from the Park Vale Towers, it suddenly occurred to Pete Alexander that a young man in need of a job would not be driving up in a taxicab. So he got out and paid off the driver, and walked the rest of the way.

This was a mistake which he later regretted.

Upon approaching the solid and imposing building where Brenda Carter lived, he expected to see a long line of applicants. In this, however, he was mistaken. There were, as yet, no seekers after the job. One of the reasons for this was that the newspaper had only just come out, and whereas others might have to use the subway, Pete had come in a cab.

He was about to turn into the entrance of the Park Vale Apartments when he was stopped by a man standing near the door. This man was dressed in a chauffeur's uniform. His face was bleak and forbidding, and he had a discolored blotch on his right cheek, the size of a quarter. The chauffeur glanced at the newspaper folded under Pete's arm, which he had taken from his doorman, and said:

"You answering the ad?"

Pete nodded.

The chauffeur took a card from his pocket, and gave it to Pete. "You'll have to go to this address. I'm Miss Carter's chauffeur. The management of this building objects to having ap-

plicants coming through here, so you'll have to be interviewed at this other address. Have you got car fare?"

"No," lied Pete.

The chauffeur took out a nickel and gave it to him.

Pete looked at the nickel in his hand and said, "Suppose I don't get the job? How will I get back downtown?"

"That's *your* worry."

Pete didn't like that chauffeur at all. He shrugged, and turned away. As he did so, he noticed the black limousine which was parked a few feet back from the entrance. There was no particular reason why he should have noticed it, except that he caught a glimpse of an enormous, revoltingly fat man within it. The fat man was plucking at a pendulous lower lip with a pair of pudgy fingers.

Pete got only a swift glimpse, and then the fat man moved back in his seat.

The whole thing was only an impression, to which Pete attached no significance at all. As he moved away from the building, he was almost on the point of chucking the idea. But he knew that if he did so, he would only remain miserably awake.

So, for lack of anything else to do, Pete walked around the corner till he was out of sight of the chauffeur, and caught a passing taxicab. He gave the address on the card the chauffeur had handed him. It was: 1028 East 110th Street.

Going uptown in the cab, he opened the newspaper and glanced at the headlines on the front page. He saw there the item about the death of Amos Beckett in the subway station, and he read also about the strange death of Arnold Wiggins and his bodyguard.

Suddenly, as he read that last item, he sat up straight, with a new surge of interest. *Wiggins and his bodyguard had been murdered while they slept!*

Continuing, he learned that Arnold Wiggins' cousin, Luther, had also died in his sleep. And he saw the bit of information that Wiggins had been a member of the banking firm of Wiggins and Carter.

Carter!

Then this girl, Brenda Carter, who had inserted the want ad, was not acting through mere whim. It was something that was touching her closely—with the finger of death!

Pete Alexander's mind was already racing with a plot for a book. This would make a knockout mystery novel. He would call it: NEVER TO WAKE AGAIN!

What a title! And what a theme! All he had to do now, was work out a good motive—a reason why some one should want to kill these people in their sleep. Pete had already forgotten his insomnia.

It was with keen and lively interest that he left his cab at 108th Street and walked the two blocks to the address on 110th.

When he reached it, he was more puzzled and intrigued than ever, for the place turned out to be a small, dirty pet shop on the street floor of a tenement house.

There could be no doubt that this was the place, for the name on the dusty window read:

EDGAR SALMON

That was the name written on the card which the chauffeur had given him. Just to make sure, Pete dug into his pocket and took out the card. Then he stood there in the street, staring blankly at it.

THERE was absolutely nothing on the card. He turned it over. The other side was blank, too. If there had been anything written on it, the ink had disappeared.

Pete had used that stunt of disappearing ink in one of his mystery books. But this was the first time he had ever had it tried on him in real life.

He put the card back in his pocket, and entered the pet store of Mr. Edgar Salmon. There were three puppies in the window, all asleep. Inside the store there was a cage with a sleeping canary, and a glass-enclosed box with six kittens in it. All the kittens were sleeping, too.

A man with a gaunt face and very deep-set eyes came out from the rear. His hair was all white. He might have looked like a venerable patriarch out of the Bible, except for the sharp malevolence of those deep-set eyes.

"Yes?" he asked, eyeing Pete's rumpled clothing and the weary stoop of his shoulders. "Yes? What is it?"

"I was sent here by Miss Carter's chauffeur," Pete said, "to be interviewed for the job."

"What job? What are you talking about?"

"This ad," Pete said, folding the paper back to the classified page, and pointing out the item. "Miss Brenda Carter sent me."

The white-haired Edgar Salmon waved the paper away irritably. "I know nobody by that name. What sort of nonsense is this?"

"I'm sorry," Pete said. "This is the address I was told to go to. Perhaps I've made a mistake."

"I'm sure you have!" Edgar Salmon told him sourly. "Good-bye!"

Pete looked the picture of dejection as he turned to leave. When he was almost at the door, the white-haired man called after him harshly.

"Wait! Come back here!"

Pete turned and came back.

The white-haired man was studying him with what was supposed to be a sympathetic smile.

"You're broke and looking for a job, aren't you?"

He said it in a kindly manner, but Pete sensed at once that this old man's solicitude was phony. Nevertheless he acted up to it.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I was counting on getting this job. You see, I suffer from insomnia, and this ad is right up my alley."

"Tsk, tsk," Edgar Salmon said. "It's probably a hoax of some kind. You can see that by the fact that they sent you on a wild goose chase."

"I can see that now," Pete said. "But it doesn't help me any."

"It's a shame." The old man's voice was more kindly than ever. "Perhaps I can help you. I might be able to give you some sort of job in here. I need an assistant to take care of the pets, and clean up. I couldn't pay you much —say eighteen dollars a week—"

"That would be wonderful!" Pete Alexander said.

"All right, then, you're hired. You look as if you could use a drink—to your new job."

"Well—"

"Tut, tut. I like a drink once in a while, myself. Come here!"

The old man went behind the counter and produced a bottle of rye and a glass. He poured a stiff three fingers, and handed it to Pete.

"Drink that. I just had one."

Pete took the glass and downed the contents at a gulp. It was good rye whiskey, but there was a sort of smoky flavor he didn't like. When he put the glass down, he saw that the old man was watching him keenly out of those deep-set eyes.

"Feel better now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Now you can go in back and lie down awhile. I'll call you when I need you. You look as if you could use a little rest. Aren't you tired and sleepy?"

"Yes, I guess I am," Pete lied.

He allowed the old man to lead him into the rear room. It was dirty, and the paint was cracking off the walls. There was a closed trapdoor in the center of the floor. At one side was a filthy-looking cot, and beside it a table.

"Lie down," said the old man.

Pete lay down. He saw the old man watching him as if he were some kind of specimen on the dissecting table.

"You said you suffered from insomnia?"

"Yes, sir," Pete said, stretching out.

"How long since you've slept?"

"A week."

"Well, don't let that worry you. You'll sleep now."

PETE didn't feel the least bit sleepy. He was aware that the drink the old man had given him must have contained knockout drops of some kind. But they weren't having any effect on him. He could have told the old man that Doctor Menzies had dosed him with enough knockout drops to fell a bull, but that they hadn't even made him wink an eye. However, he refrained from saying anything, and closed his eyes.

He heard the old man chuckle, and go out. He heard a bolt click on the outside of the door.

He lay very still, breathing regularly. He feared that Edgar Salmon might be watching him through a peephole of some kind.

A minute passed, then two. The telephone rang, out in the store.

A moment later it stopped ringing, as the receiver was removed from the hook. This was Pete's chance, for the old man would be answering that phone. He jumped up from the cot, and sped stealthily to the door. He pressed his ear against the panel and heard the old man talking.

"That you, Vilgus? Yes, he's here. It was very easy. He's sound asleep in there. Any more coming? No more, eh? I guess this one was the only fool. All right, I'll dispose of him. I'll wait here, yes. Phone me if you send any more up."

Pete hurried back to the cot, and lay down. The bolt slid on the door, and Pete heard the old man's feet pounding across the floor toward him.

Pete waited until he judged the old man was standing directly above him. Then he opened his eyes.

He had not done so a moment too soon. He uttered a gasp of surprise. Edgar Salmon was gripping an odd-shaped weapon in his right hand. It looked like a hatpin. It was some eight inches long, of glittering steel. But it was set into a handle which afforded an excellent grip.

Between the handle and the blade there was a metal shield of some sort, round and about three inches in diameter. If the hatpin were driven into a person's body, the metal shield would come down flush against the wound and seal it up, so that the blood could not escape. The bleeding would be internal, and would leave no nasty mess.

Pete glimpsed all this in a flash. The old man had the weapon poised above Pete's heart, and was in the act of driving it down.

Pete rolled over desperately, into Salmon's legs, and the old man's knife-hand came down viciously, missing Pete's body by inches, and driving into the cot. Pete took advantage of the old man's position by twisting around on his back again and driving both knees against Salmon's jaw.

Salmon was leaning down just far enough to be within reach of those lashing knees. Bone struck bone, and there was a cracking sound. Salmon's lower jaw telescoped into his upper jawbone, his eyes glazed, and he fell prone across Pete.

Pete shoved him over unceremoniously, then scrambled to his feet. Now he knew what he had to do, and he knew he had to do it quickly. He left the old man on the cot, not touching the deadly hatpin dagger, which was still quivering in the mattress. He hurried out of the back room, bolting the door. In the store all the animals were asleep, just as they had been when he arrived.

Pete picked up the telephone, and dialed police headquarters. "You must send detectives to Miss Brenda Carter, at the Park Vale Towers!" he said urgently, as soon as he got the homicide department. "I have reason to believe an attempt will be made on her life at any moment!"

"Who's this talking?" the sergeant at the other end demanded.

Pete gave his name. "I'm up here at 110th Street in Salmon's petshop. I've

just broken the proprietor's jaw—"

"Oh, you have, have you? Well wait right there—"

"Never mind about me. I tell you, Miss Brenda Carter is in danger. They're going to kill her just as they killed Beckett and the two Wiggins cousins—"

"Don't you worry about Miss Carter," the sergeant said. "We've got a man detailed up there. You wait for our radio car."

"But I tell you, one man won't be enough. They'll put him to sleep—"

"Forget it. You've got your own troubles—breaking a guy's jaw—"

"But I tell you, he's in this plot. He's working with the murderers of Beckett and Wiggins. They sent me up here."

"They did? Who sent you?"

"A chauffeur with a blotch on his face. He wrote the address on a card, but it disappeared—"

"Oh, I see. It disappeared. Did the man disappear, too?"

"Listen," Pete said desperately, "maybe I sound crazy, but I'm telling you the unvarnished truth."

"Sure, sure. You just wait there—"

Pete hung up in disgust. He fairly ran out of the store and hurried toward the corner. Just as he reached it, he heard brakes squealing behind him. He turned and saw a radio car pulling up at the door of Salmon's Pet Shop. The sergeant had just been trying to keep him engaged on the phone, while he had sent out the signal for the radio car.

Pete ducked around the corner, walked a block, and found a cab.

"I want to get to the Park Vale Towers—as fast as this thing will go!" he gasped. He flung a ten-dollar bill at the driver. "Ten more if you do it in ten minutes!"

"Hang on!" said the driver.

IN EIGHT minutes they reached the building. From way down the block, Pete spied the chauffeur with the blotched face, still standing in front of the door. He leaned forward and said urgently to the driver:

"Don't stop. Drive past slowly and go around the block. I'll use the service entrance."

The driver nodded. As the cab crept past, Pete spotted that same black limousine which he'd seen there earlier. But this time the fat and repulsive man was no longer inside.

Pete's cab swung around the corner and stopped at the service entrance. He gave the man another ten-dollar bill and hurried inside.

There was a short ramp leading down into the basement, where the service entrance was located. Pete swung into it, spotted the service elevator shaft. The cage was upstairs, and the door of the shaft was closed. But a man, in the tan service coat of the Park Vale Apartments, was lying on the floor, sleeping.

Pete swore under his breath. Perhaps he was too late.

He had never met this Brenda Carter, who had advertised. But he understood now the error which had impelled her to advertise for a man who suffered from insomnia. She must dread falling asleep, just as much as Pete dreaded staying awake. He felt deep sympathy for her, without ever having seen her. He wanted very much to keep her alive. And he had to get upstairs somehow.

He made his way through the basement, passing the sleeping figure of another man, near the oil burner. This was the fireman. Pete shivered. He had heard old Edgar Salmon address someone over the phone as "Vilgus." This Vilgus, then, must be preparing to make his attack upon Brenda Carter. He was clearing the way by putting all the building employees to sleep.

Pete found a stairway which led up into the lobby. As he stepped in at the rear, he glimpsed the figure of the grim chauffeur, standing outside, in front of the door. The chauffeur's back was toward him.

Pete made his way swiftly across

the lobby, treading on tiptoe. The passenger elevator was at the other end, and alongside it was a sort of information desk. He peered behind that desk and saw the sleeping figures of two more uniformed men. These must be the doorman and the elevator operator.

The passenger elevator was at the main floor here, and the door was open. Pete did not hesitate. He stepped into the cage and pushed the door shut. As he did so, he glimpsed the chauffeur, turning around at the noise.

Pete pulled back the lever, and the cage shot up. He kept the lever back until the cage reached the top, and stopped. The lettering on the door said *Penthouse*. This would be where Brenda Carter lived.

Pete slid the door open and stepped out into the hall. He half expected to see some one lurking there, but the hall was empty. There was only one door on this floor.

Pete rang the bell and waited. For a long time no one answered. Then he heard soft movement inside, and a girl's voice asked, "Who is it?"

"I've come in answer to the ad, Miss Carter," he said. "Let me in. Quickly. I've found out who's trying to kill you!"

There was a long period of silence. Pete thought the girl had gone away from the door. But then he heard the faint murmur of voices on the other side. She was talking to a man, in undertones. At last the man's voice was raised.

"You, out there. What's your name?"

"Peter Alexander. I've come in answer to the ad."

"You say you know who's trying to kill us?"

"I just discovered his name. It's Vilgus."

"Vilgus! You know, then! How did you find out?"

"Please let me in," Pete begged. "Every minute counts."

"How do we know that you're not from Vilgus? How do we know you won't attempt to kill us when we open the door?"

"You've got to believe me," Pete said urgently. "For Heaven's sake, let me in!"

Once more there was a low colloquy. Then the girl's voice, decisively: "I'm in favor of letting him in, dad. He sounds honest and sincere. We have to take the chance."

There was a sliding of bolts, and then the door came open.

PETE saw Eric Carter standing in the open doorway, with the heavy Smith & Wesson in his hand pointing straight at Pete. Then Pete saw Brenda Carter. His eyes grew wide with admiration. He liked copper-colored hair, anyway. But in combination with Brenda's lovely face and figure, it got him down for the count.

He started to come in, but Eric Carter thrust the revolver forward and snapped, "Not so fast! You've got to convince us you're on the level!"

"You must believe me!" Pete pleaded. "I have no way of proving my honesty, out here in the hall. But you can keep that gun pointed at me every second I'm inside with you, until I do prove it."

"Hah!" said Eric Carter. "And what if we fall asleep while you're in here? We'll be at your mercy!"

Pete shrugged hopelessly. "I know how you feel. I'd be just as suspicious. But I can only tell you that you haven't much time. I think that man, Vilgus, has already come up by the service elevator. He may be at the service door right now."

"Come in," Brenda Carter said suddenly, her frank eyes meeting his openly. "I trust you."

Pete smiled. He came inside. The girl closed the door and double-locked it, then turned to face him.

Swiftly, then, Pete told everything that had happened.

"You can check on me," he finished, "by phoning Doctor Menzies at my

hotel. He'll confirm who I am, and that I suffer from insomnia."

"We couldn't call anyway," Eric Carter said, bitterly. "Our wire has been cut."

"Where is the detective who was supposed to guard you?"

"Asleep in the next room," Brenda told him. "And so is the maid. There must be something in the air of this room, or else it was in something they ate or drank. Dad and I probably got it, too, but it's taking longer to get us, because we dosed ourselves with caffeine tablets."

Brenda's father shrugged hopelessly and let himself down into a chair. He let the Smith & Wesson hang between his knees.

"We're done," he said. "I don't care for myself. It's Brenda—and now you."

"I wouldn't be out of it for anything!" Pete said looking at Brenda.

"It doesn't change the situation, though. This man, Vilgus, has nursed hatred for dad, and Amos Beckett and the two Wigginses, for twenty-five years. It goes back to when they were all young and starting in business. The five of them were together in a new corporation, and they got all their friends and relatives to invest in it.

"Then this Vilgus embezzled every nickel in the treasury and ruined the corporation. Dozens of dad's friends were ruined, too, as well as friends and relatives of the others. Vilgus was prosecuted, and he went to jail for ten years. He has hated his former partners ever since. When he got out of jail, he disappeared, but he kept sending each of them a letter, once a year, promising to come back. Well, now he's back. And dad and I are the only survivors—so far." She turned to her father. "Show Pete the letter you got yesterday, dad."

She choked back a cry of dismay. Eric Carter was dozing in his chair. His head was hanging down, the revolver slipping from his fingers.

"It's creeping up on me, too!" Brenda cried desperately. "I can hardly keep my eyes open!"

Pete carried Eric Carter over to the davenport. By the time Pete turned around, he saw Brenda swaying on her feet.

"Brenda!" he whispered in her ear. "Brenda darling. Don't worry. Go to sleep. I'll stay awake. You'll be all right."

She smiled, then her head sagged. She was asleep, too.

Pete lifted her up and carried her over to an easy chair. Gently he set her down in it, then got a cushion off the sofa and placed it under her head. She was beautiful in sleep.

Grimly Pete gripped the Smith & Wesson, and pulled a chair over to the wall. He sat thus, with his back protected, facing the rear door, through which Vilgus would eventually come.

HE SAT there that way for five minutes, his thoughts in a turmoil. There must be some way of communicating with the outside world. It was preposterous that they should be cut off, here, in the center of the city, from all help. He dared not leave the room, lest Vilgus enter and find Brenda and her father asleep and defenseless.

He spotted a small radio near where he sat. He reached over and turned it on. It was two o'clock, and the news was just coming in—every hour on the hour—over WNYC.

"It has been established," the announcer was saying, "that a serum known as *hypnotoxin** was introduced into the organs of Amos Beckett and Arnold Wiggins, as well as of the bodyguard, Joe Kleeber.

"*Hypnotoxin* is a toxic serum produced in small quantities in the body of every active person. It acts to soothe the nerves, so that the human body is ready for sleep at the end of the day. In the case of Beckett and Wiggins, this serum was introduced in such large quantities that it induced immediate sleep.

"Two slices of chewing gum were found in Beckett's pockets. These, upon being analyzed, were found to contain *hypnotoxin*. The machine from which Beckett purchased the gum has been inspected, and it has been found that some one substituted the serum-treated gum in place of the regular merchandise ordinarily vended by the machine. This must have been done during the quiet hours of the early morning, when there are comparatively few commuters on the subway.

"It is assumed that Wiggins and his bodyguard were also fed the *hypnotoxin*, by introducing it into some food or drink which they were known to take regularly. A detective has been assigned to guard Eric Carter, the partner of Arnold Wiggins. . . ."

Pete laughed bitterly. If the police department only knew that their detective was sound asleep at this very moment. . . .

He started up abruptly, with a jerk. A spasm of sudden terror ran through him, *for he realized that he had just been dozing!*

He sprang up from the chair in sudden frantic desperation. His eyes were beginning to feel heavy. He was experiencing a sudden deep lethargy, which seemed to creep up upon his entire body and to envelop his brain in a mist.

In a panic, he realized that Doctor Menzies' drug, plus the hypnotoxin which he must have been fed in the drink by Edgar Salmon, were finally taking their effect.

He would soon be sound asleep like Brenda and her father!

It was at that moment that he heard the stealthy footsteps in the next room.

He was drowsy. Terribly drowsy. Through a mist he saw Brenda on the chair, sleeping quietly like a fairy princess. But in a moment he—Pete Alexander, whom she had trusted—

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: For the nature and effects of *hypnotoxin*, see Encyclopaedia Britannica, Fourteenth Edition, Volume 20, page 793.

would also be asleep, and there would be nothing to protect her from the sharp thrust of the hatpin dagger.

He gripped the gun tightly and forced his eyes to bulge open. A terrible stupor was assailing him. He fought it madly. He was as terribly eager to remain awake now as he had been to fall asleep a couple of hours ago. But now his wish was being granted—with a vengeance.

Dimly, he heard slithering footsteps in the next room. He could barely see the doorway. Voices became audible, speaking low.

"I think they're asleep all right, boss." It was the voice of the chauffeur with the blotch on his face.

Then the other voice—it could be only that of Vilgus—that sounded fat and slimy like its owner. "These are the last. They fell asleep, knowing that I would come. They must have suffered, eh, Botts? They must have suffered every second while they were fighting the sleep, knowing they'd never awaken!"

And then the slimy voice was raised in laughter.

"Let's go in and finish it!"

Pete Alexander was down on his knees now, alongside the chair. He couldn't keep on his feet. He couldn't see the doorway clearly. He had to put both hands on the gun to hold it steady.

The doorway loomed large and weird, its proportions all awry. It floated and took queer shapes. The steps came closer, and then he saw the blurred images of two shapes stepping into the room.

The fat man was gripping one of those vicious hatpin knives, and the chauffeur had an automatic. At least, that's what he thought he saw. In a moment, he knew, he'd be seeing nothing, he'd be sound asleep.

He threw every ounce of strength and will power into his two hands. He squeezed the trigger again and again.

The slamming explosions of the heavy gun shocked him awake for a brief instant. It was long enough for him to see the chauffeur clutching at his stomach and falling forward, and the fat man standing high up on his toes, with an expression of stunned astonishment on his jellyish face. Then the chauffeur dropped to the floor on his face, and the fat man fell over him. Neither moved.

That momentary shock passed, and the heavy lethargy descended once more upon Pete Alexander.

Through the fog that enveloped him he whispered: "It's all right, Brenda. I—didn't—fail you. . . ."

Then he dropped the gun and slid down on the floor and went to sleep. There was a smile of beatific pleasure upon his face.

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Dealer in Doom

By William C. Harrison

Money meant more than anything else to John Kierly—even more than honor. So he sold his honor, but rang up the cash register—too soon.

STANDING there at the window of his study, John Kierly smiled and let his thoughts run out against the darkness of the night. It was raining out there, a cold, damp drizzle that was beginning to curdle into shifting gray wraiths of fog. An occasional pair of headlamps poked their diffused beams against the murk, marking cars that g r o p e d cautiously along the street below.

Looking out into the wet blackness, John Kierly let his smile stretch wider, f e e l i n g confidence grow through the fear and uncertainty that had gripped him the last few hours.

Everything was going to work out all right. A job like this wasn't hard if you considered all the details and made your plans accordingly. It was those who forgot the little things who filled the prisons and criminal courts —those who had considered only the final result and not the elements that made it.

Kierly glanced at his watch and began injecting the elements into his test tube of murder. It was twenty minutes before eight, and across the town Charles Brandon would be parking his coupé in its reserved space outside the fence of the Brandon Laboratory. Brandon was like that, a man of habit and precise thinking. Time for Brandon was a yardstick that measured each act and thought.

And as he watched the minute hand of his watch crawl on, Kierly could see the chemist passing through the guarded fence gate and letting himself into the building. But Brandon would not notice the small square package just inside the door. He would pass by it with his mind filled with thoughts of the night's work. He would throw his hat and coat over the chair in the hall and continue on to the laboratory.

No, Charles Brandon would not notice the lethal package just inside the door, but murder would wait patiently in the darkness and when the hour dragged to a close. . . .

IT WAS after they had completed the final test that afternoon that Charles Brandon had looked up from the laboratory bench. "This is it, John. We've got it this time. I've known we were on the right track the last month, and this is it."

John Kierly dropped his eyes quickly to the notebook on the bench to hide the sudden leap of his thoughts. "Formula seventy-three," he said, "the most powerful explosive yet discovered."

And then, once more sure of himself, he looked up at Brandon's low

murmur: "The most deadly explosive, John."

Uncertainty crossed the chemist's face like a shadow, and he made a weary, bitter gesture with his hand. "This isn't our work, John. We've discovered an agent of destruction. This isn't our job. Science should be used to help mankind, not to develop new weapons and poisons and explosives like this we've found."

John Kierly said: "Formula seventy-three is worth a fortune to us." He hadn't been able to smother the elation from his voice, and he knew Brandon had caught it. "The government will pay our price for what we've found here."

But as he said this, Kierly had been thinking of the quietly dressed foreigners who had met him weeks before, and had kept in close touch with him ever since. He felt the reproval in Brandon's glance.

"Money isn't everything, John," the chemist said quietly. "We'll give our formula to the government, maybe—but not sell it. I won't take money for using my science to develop an explosive that will be used to kill and maim, even if it is used to protect our country."

"Don't be a fool, Brandon! This is worth a fortune."

The chemist smiled. "I guess money is more important to you than it is to me, John. I've noticed that ever since you became my assistant. You skimp on the meals you buy; you haven't bought yourself a new suit of clothes since you came here."

"But I've got money, and you're broke most of the time, wondering how you'll pay your bills."

Brandon went on, quietly amused. "You even cut down the postage on the packages you ship out. Jim Ferris was ribbing me in a letter the other day that he's had to finish out the postage on nearly every analysis shipment you've made to him. It's probably been that way with everyone else we do work for. Some day they'll refuse to complete the postage, and you'll get a bunch of shipments back."

Kierly said, "I've saved you several hundred dollars that way this year."

Brandon nodded. "I don't doubt that, John; I don't doubt it."

Kierly dropped his eyes to the notebook on the bench. "Is that why you've kept the formula from me?"

The chemist shook his head slowly, his smile fading against his gravity. "You're a penny pincher, John, but I think you're honest. You're a money saver, and I'm not, that's all. No, that's not the reason. But there are foreign agents who would do anything to get this formula, and as long as you don't know the formula you'll be in no danger. I learned that during the last war."

STANDING there at the window, John Kierly remembered these things, and thought of the notebook he had stolen before Brandon had locked the safe. He said in his mind: "But you'll never know, Brandon; you'll never know."

He reached behind him and pressed a button on his desk. He turned as the door opened across the room. It was his housekeeper a gray and worn little woman. She said:

"Was you wanting something, Mr. Kierly?"

He said: "You've been asking for a night off. You can have this one, Mrs. Fowler."

"Thank you, sir. It's my daughter—"

He halted her impatiently. "Of course you'll forfeit your night's pay, you know. And leave the front door unlocked when you go. I'm expecting some friends, and they'll let themselves in. That's all, Mrs. Fowler."

The woman was gone, and it was ten minutes before eight. Outside, the fog was a gray-black mass that pressed against the house and smothered the sounds from the street below. At three minutes of eight Kierly heard the front door open and close,

and he knew that Dr. Bruckner and Kurt Schmidt had come.

Dr. Bruckner, with his high square shoulders stood tall and coldly expressionless in the doorway of the study, his glance a sharp and restless thing.

"You have succeeded, Mr. Kierly? Is that why you called my office?" His words were clipped and intent.

Kierly said, "Yes," and nodded. "You brought the money with you?"

"Of course." Bruckner's manner became brusque. "Herr Schmidt is at the outer door to see we are not interrupted. You are sure what you have done will not be discovered?"

Kierly made his dry lips into a smile. "I sent a parcel post so it would reach the laboratory when only the guard was there, and he has orders to put all packages inside the door. Brandon is working tonight as usual, and the nitro-glycerin in the package will be exploded at eight. In less than a minute now."

A heavy motor rumbled to a halt in front of the house, and then moved on. "There'll be a fire after the explosion that will wipe out all evidence. To the police it will be a laboratory accident—regrettable, but one of those things. In less than a minute now."

Dr. Bruckner nodded, faintly contemptuous. "You have handled this well, Mr. Kierly. Money is good, is it not?"

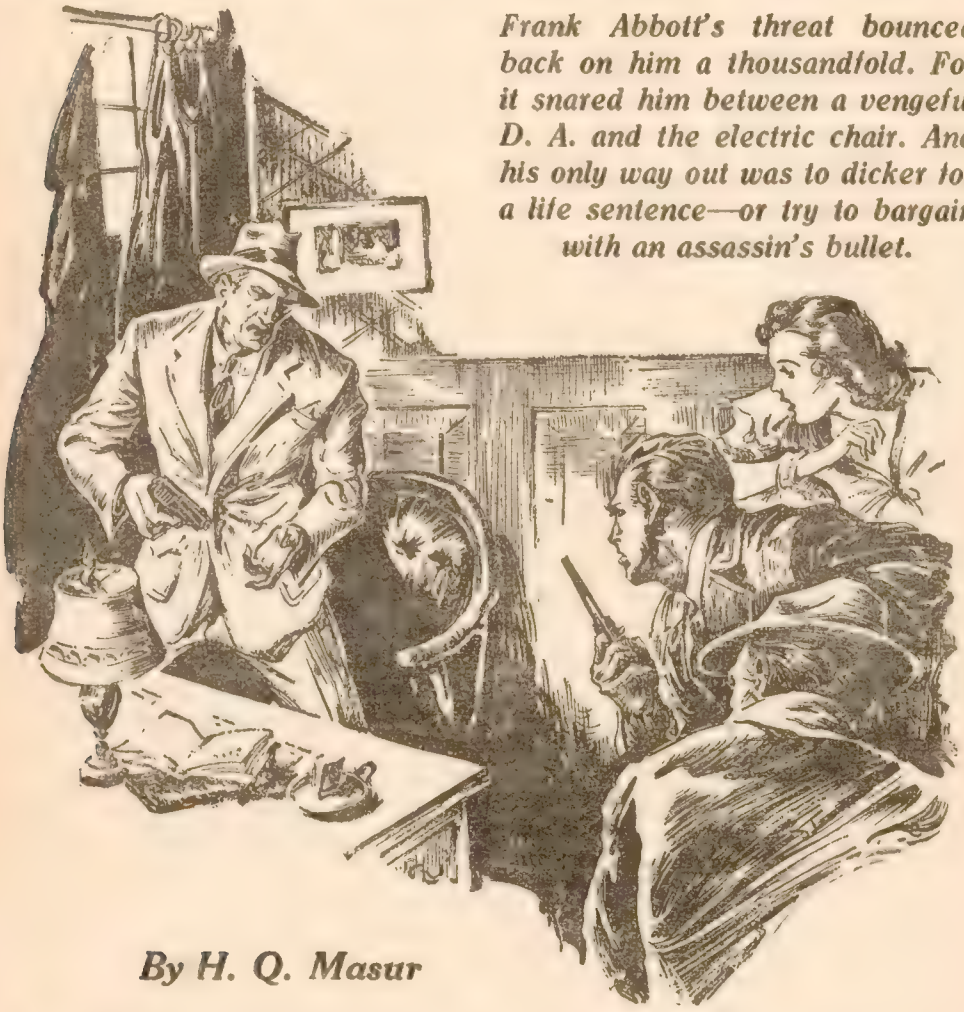
Kierly said, "Yes," looking at the thick wallet Bruckner took from his pocket. He dropped his eyes to his watch, and saw twenty seconds separating the minute hand from the end of the hour. His heart began pounding in his ears, and through that sound he heard footsteps coming up the hall.

Bruckner said, "It is H e r r Schmidt," and then Kurt Schmidt's high-shouldered red figure was filling the doorway. Kierly's blood turned to ice, and his brain went dead. He stood there in frozen horror while the seconds ticked into the past, hearing the echo of Charles Brandon's words, *"You're a penny pincher, John, a penny pincher,"* and all that while staring at the package the man had brought into the room.

"The guard at the laboratory would not accept this," Schmidt said. "The postman just drove away, Mr. Kierly, and he said the package had been returned because of insufficient postage."

John Kierly opened his mouth, but he couldn't talk. In just about two seconds, he knew his own penny-pinching quality was going to deprive him of a fortune—and of his life. So he stood there and stared with widened eyes at the package in Schmidt's hands.

Murder on My Hands



Frank Abbott's threat bounced back on him a thousandfold. For it snared him between a vengeful D. A. and the electric chair. And his only way out was to dicker for a life sentence—or try to bargain with an assassin's bullet.

By H. Q. Masur

"YOU'D be better off dead!"

I didn't think anybody else heard me and I must have been plenty sore to say it. We were standing in the hallway, Sue Kinney and I, and arguing about her roommate. We'd been arguing about Lillian Elwain for the past hour and I should have known that Sue was getting fed up.

"She's not your type," I threw at her. "She's no good. Where did she get that mink coat and all those diamonds?"

Color made a bright splash against Sue's cheeks. She said angrily: "Lillian's my friend."

I stared at her with my nails digging into my hands, hardly able to think straight. "You'll have to choose between us," I growled.

A door jerked open across the hall and a frowsy-haired old maid with a fat face stuck her head out and snapped: "Shut up and let a body get some sleep." She kept her door open, glaring at us, so I stamped toward the stairs and flung back:

"Okay, Sue, you asked for it."

A thin drizzle was peppering the street when I got downstairs and I pulled my coat collar up against it. A tall, angular figure hulked out of the shadows in front of the building and slid over to me. A cigaret hung limply from his lips.

"Got a match, bud."

I lit one for him and by the flickering orange flame saw a long wolfish face with deep-set eyes. The eyes peered intently at me over the light, and then just as suddenly as he'd appeared he floated away.

I shrugged and started walking. I didn't feel like going to sleep. Fighting with Sue had left me with a sick, empty feeling. But it was only because I loved her so much that I objected to her roommate.

They'd been friends in some little village back home in Idaho, and when Sue came to the big city six months ago, she'd looked up Lillian Elwain and moved in with her. They were as different as two girls could possibly be. The corn was still sticking out of Sue's hair, but Lillian Elwain had taken to the city like a hawk takes to the sky.

She was beautiful all right, tall, Vikingesque, with rich blonde hair, full sensuous lips, and a figure that would have made a Ziegfeld agent positively drool. She was a dancer at the Blue Chip Club and she was loaded with the kind of gifts she could never buy out of her salary.

I was afraid, I guess, afraid she might put ideas into Sue's head, scared I might lose her to some phony with a pile of tin. It was plain dumb. I should have known Sue better.

I wound up in some tavern on Sixth Avenue, where an old juke box was murdering the Blue Danube, and had a couple of beers. I stayed there for about an hour and then headed for home.

I CLIMBED the stairs of the brownstone rooming house, keyed open my door and clicked on the light. I stood stiffly, staring at the two guys, one sitting on my bed, the other leaning against the wall, both of them watching me with wary alertness.

"You Frank Abbott?" asked the man on the bed.

I nodded.

"Where've you been the last couple of hours?"

I was getting sore. "What's that to you?"

The man leaning against the wall snagged down the corners of his mouth. His face had a frozen expression. "Tough, ain't he, Gallaher?"

Gallagher pulled out a gold shield and said: "We're from headquarters. I want to warn you, Abbott, that anything you say might be held against you."

I'd never been in a jam before, never'd had anything to do with cops. Moisture formed on my forehead and I reached back for my handkerchief. The frozen-faced cop must have thought I was reaching for a weapon. He heaved forward, swinging, and a big fist rocked against my jaw with an impact that slammed me back. He kept after me, crowding me to the wall.

I swayed. I felt my legs go rubbery, then they collapsed and the floor swung up into my face.

He stooped, breathing hard, felt into my back pocket, then ran his hands all over my clothes. He pulled his foot back and aimed a kick at me.

"Where'd you ditch it?" he rasped.

I stared at him through glazed eyes. "Ditch w-what?"

"The gun, you little rat!" He dug the tip of his shoe into my side.

"Easy, Krass!" Gallagher snapped. There was sharp authority in his voice and Krass backed away.

I staggered to my feet. The spots hadn't cleared from my eyes. I swallowed. "Look, what's all this about a gun? I never had a gun. What would I need a gun for?"

Krass answered, g r i n d i n g the

words out. "To kill that girl in 3-C at the Marner Apartments."

"To kill—" My throat tightened, and the skin stretched coldly across my back. "Sue!" It was a hoarse bark.

Gallagher's eyes shifted significantly toward Krass, then he nodded. "Yeah," he said laconically, "she's dead all right. Shot twice—once through the heart and once through the head—just to make sure."

I felt like a piece of wood, numb, lifeless. *Sue! Sue!* The name kept repeating itself over and over in my brain. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't possible. She couldn't be dead—not her.

"Come on," said Gallagher. "Let's get started."

Krass got hold of my arm and twisted it behind my back. He shoved me down the stairs behind Gallagher and into a police prowl car that was parked at the curb. A uniformed cop was behind the wheel.

"Back to the Marner Apartments," Gallagher ordered, and the driver jockeyed the car around, and we headed across town.

Two cops in glistening black slickers stood guard in front of the house. Rain dripped off the visors of their caps. We marched upstairs and into Sue's apartment. Plain-clothesmen stood in small groups, talking. They stopped and stared at me when I entered.

I looked through into the adjoining bedroom. There, upon the bed, hidden under a white sheet, was the lumpy outline of an inert figure. I twisted away from Krass' grip and stalked over. My fingers were stiff and icy as I plucked at the corner of the sheet and lifted it.

What can I say? How can I tell you about the flood of relief that surged through me? This wasn't Sue. Sue was alive—alive.

It was Lillian Elwain and she was not a pretty sight. Her face held the stark gray pallor of death, her colorless lips were stretched thinly over her teeth. Blood made a dry crust around the ugly wound in her right temple.

I uttered a sharp cry and whirled on Gallagher.

"Where is she?" I demanded. "What have you done to her?"

"Who?" he asked dryly.

"Sue—Sue Kinney, my fiancée—"

Krass said with satisfaction: "We've taken her in as a material witness. She found the body."

A COP appeared in the doorway and he had in tow the frowsy-haired old maid with the bloated face who'd broken up our argument earlier that night. Gallagher nodded at me and asked: "This the guy?"

She pointed a shaking, indignant finger. "That's him," she snapped. "That's the one said he'd rather see her dead. They were fighting in the hallway. I heard them."

"What else did he say?"

Her bleary eyes crackled. "He said, 'You asked for it,' and then he stomped away in a terrible huff. I knew something was goin' to happen. I just knew it."

I stared at her. "Wait a minute. I didn't mean—"

Gallagher waved his hand. "Take her away." His granite eyes met mine. "You still say you know nothing about this?"

"Sure. I had an argument with my girl, not with Lillian. What would I want to come back here and kill her for?"

"By mistake. You meant to kill Miss Kinney. Only after you left her she was upset and went out and took a walk. This Elwain dame came in and went to bed. You sneaked back in the dark and put two slugs into her—"

"No," I yelled, "no—"

"You'd had a fight. She was going to leave you. You were jealous. You told her she'd be better off dead."

"No—"

The sharp edge of Krass' hand slammed into the back of my neck, knocking me forward so that I stumbled against the bed in which Lillian was lying. I braced myself

with a sob. Krass' voice was a dry rasp.

"Where'd you ditch the gun? Better make it easy for us, fella. We got ways of finding out."

"I told you I don't know anything about any gun."

He pushed his fist halfway into my stomach and I doubled over with a gasp. "Where is it?" he repeated.

I straightened. My teeth were locked tight. Before he suspected anything I was on him like a wildcat, swinging blindly. I had the satisfaction of feeling my knuckles crack against his face. I hit him three times before Gallagher moved in. Something hard smashed behind my ear and I stumbled to my knees.

It was a pair of handcuffs that Gallagher had swung, and now he stooped and clicked them over my wrists. Krass lunged at me, his face twisted almost insanely. Gallagher planted his bulky figure in the way, protecting me.

"Take it easy, Krass," he soothed. "Maybe you had it coming to you."

"Get out of the way, Gallagher," Krass snarled. "I'll kill him."

Gallagher didn't move. "Shut up and behave yourself. There's a time and a place for everything." He turned then and jerked me to my feet. "Get up, Abbott. Let's go down and see the inspector."

They guided me out into the police car again. Wind slanted the rain against the windows. It was a cold bleak night, but no more bleak than my heart. I looked at Gallagher.

"Sue," I asked, "is she all right? Can I see her?"

"You won't see anybody, Abbott. You won't even be booked until you get smart and come clean."

"Come clean," I echoed. "About what? I didn't do it, I tell you. I wouldn't even hurt a fly, no less kill somebody."

Gallagher shrugged. The handcuffs were biting cruelly into my wrists. I tried to keep my hands still. The car braked in front of headquarters and they hustled me upstairs. Soon I found myself in a big square room with a desk at the far corner behind which sat a stolid figure with a jowly face and a thick mop of gray hair crowning his head.

I'd seen the district attorney's face in the papers, but there was something familiar, faintly disquieting about it, something that pricked at my memory. Maybe if I hadn't been so scared I would have been able to recall what it was that bothered me.

MARK GISSING was a political figure, a straight party man, often suspected of accepting graft from the town's upper hierachy of crime. But there were times when his whole office entered into a prosecution with the grim purposefulness of a pack of hounds bringing a trapped fox to bay, times when he wouldn't be stepping on anybody's toes, when he had some poor fall guy without connections. It helped take the smell off his office and to lull the voters into a feeling of security.

Looking at him now, at his impassive face, I knew this was one of those times.

Gallagher's eyes swept around the room. "Where's the inspector?" he demanded.

Mark Gissing jerked his head impatiently. "I'm taking personal charge of this case. The inspector will instruct you to be under my orders. This the fellow you picked up in the Elwain killing?"

Gallagher didn't like it. I could see his mouth curl in disgust. "Yeah," he replied noncommittally.

"You locate the gun he used?"

Gallagher shrugged. "Not yet."

Gissing tapped on the desk for an instant. "What's the matter with you, sergeant? You going soft? Since when do you take no for an answer?"

Gallagher's jaw clamped shut, then he opened it and said: "See here, Gissing, you've got enough stooges in your department. You don't need me. Let me out of this case."

The District Attorney's lips writhed into a thin smile. "Okay, Gallagher, you're out. Send Krass in here."

Gallagher stalked to the door, turned, started to say something, then thought better of it and slammed out of the room. But before he left I could see something akin to pity in his eyes. He seemed almost to be sorry for me.

Gissing's eyes were like chips of blue steel. He took out a silver cigar container and removed a long Havana filler and jabbed it between his square white teeth. He sucked at the flame of a match and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He glanced at a white sheet of paper, then looked up.

"Frank, that's your name, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Now, Frank, why don't you be a good fellow and tell me all about what happened? Why did you kill Miss Elwain?"

"I didn't kill her," I yelled. "Why don't you find the real murderer instead of wasting time?"

He hiked up his brows. "I think I am looking at the real murderer."

I said sullenly: "Before I tell you anything I want to see Sue Kinney. I also want to see a lawyer. I have rights and I'm going to stand on them."

He rolled the cigar between his fingertips, squinting at the glowing tip, flicked off the ash and said: "My dear boy, you only think you have rights. There isn't one damn thing you can do until some lawyer gets a writ, but there's plenty—plenty *I* can do. Now why don't you save yourself a lot of grief and—"

"Grief!" I ejaculated. "I don't get it. I haven't done anything. What are you running here, a secret Gestapo?"

He shrugged slightly. "Call it what you like. I trust for your own sake you're in good health."

The door opened and Krass came in. From his gloating expression I gathered he knew that Sergeant Gallagher had stepped out of the case. I gathered too that he liked that, and meant to enjoy it right down to the end of a length of rubber hose. He lumbered forward, smirking.

"You did the right thing sending for me, Mr. Gissing," he said. "I know how to handle guys like Abbott."

Gissing nodded shortly. "Maybe you'll get your chance. Get the Kinney girl and bring her here."

KRASS left the room and returned a moment later with Sue. Her face was drawn, her eyes red from lack of sleep, and her soft red mouth warped with anxiety. She gave a little cry and rushed toward me, but Krass had hold of her wrist and yanked her back.

"Frank—Frank . . ." she whispered. "What are they trying to do to you?"

"Don't worry, kid," I said. "Everything's going to be all right."

I wrenched the words out and they had a phony ring to them. How could I convince Sue if I didn't feel that way myself?

Sue looked at the district attorney. "You can't accuse Frank of killing Lillian, Mr. Gissing. You don't know him. He wouldn't do a thing like that."

Gissing leaned back to watch the effect of his words. "Maybe he killed her by mistake. Maybe he meant to kill you. You'd been having a heated argument. What was the fight about?"

Sue opened her mouth and started to say something. I mouthed her name abruptly: "Sue!"

She stopped short and stared at me, horror entering her eyes. We'd been fighting about Lillian. She mustn't tell that to the D. A. It might be construed as a motive. Gissing was watching us narrowly. He stood up, walked around his desk, and beckoned to Krass to follow.

"We'll leave you two alone to talk it over," he said. "Maybe you'll realize you can't fight this thing."

The door closed behind them and I turned to Sue. There was a bewildered look in her face. I went close and pressed her shoulders between my fingers. "Whatever happens, Sue, you know that I love you, that nothing in

this world would make me hurt you. I want you to believe in me. If you didn't, I don't care what they do to me."

She shook her head. "I do, Frank, I do. I see now that you were right about Lillian. She has gotten us into trouble."

I put a finger to my lips, catwalked around the room, looking behind pictures, under the furniture, in every concealed spot. I found the dictaphone under the desk. I didn't tear out the wire. I stuffed my handkerchief around and into the mouthpiece.

"Now," I said softly, "tell me what happened, everything."

She clasped her hands tightly together. "After you left me I felt terrible. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep so I went for a long walk. I don't know how long I was out, but when I came back I found—" She gulped. "It was terrible, Frank. I suppose I must have screamed because the neighbors came rushing in, and then there were the police. They kept asking me questions and finally they brought me down here."

I said. "Now tell me about Lillian. Who has she been going with? Who bought her all those expensive gifts?"

I stiffened at the sudden look of fear which jumped into her eyes. I could see her throat working. Finally she said in a barely audible whisper: "It was supposed to be a secret. I promised never to tell."

"They're accusing me of murder, Sue. Who was it?"

She wet her lips. "Mr. Gissing," she breathed.

I stood there and stared at her. And then it came to me, what had been familiar about the district attorney's face when I first entered this office. I had been in Sue's apartment once, waiting for her in the living room. There had been a small photograph album on the table and I'd glanced through it. There were pictures, snapshots taken in the country, of Lillian Elwain and a big, blocky-faced man with graying hair.

That man was Mark Gissing, the district attorney who was trying to burn me for the murder of his girl.

I was breathing hard, thinking that he had a double motive now for convicting me. Suddenly I felt weak and I sat down on the edge of the desk. The walls of the room seemed to be closing in on me, boxing me in.

"How did they get along?" I asked.

"Fine," Sue said. "I think he really loved her." And then Sue's eyes clouded. "Except recently, Lillian had been seeing someone else and I know they argued about it. I heard her trying to placate Mr. Gissing over the phone."

"This other fellow, who is he?"

Sue shook her head hopelessly. "I don't know."

"Listen," I told her earnestly, "you've got to find out. Look through all of Lillian's belongings. Then go to Sergeant Gallagher of the homicide squad and tell him everything. But be careful, Sue, don't let anybody find out what you're doing. And don't—"

I stopped talking. The door knob was twisting slowly. A few seconds later the door swung open and the district attorney's heavy figure appeared. He had worked his mouth into a scowl. He came slowly into the room.

"We're not going to hold you, Abbott," he said. "We haven't enough evidence—yet. But you're not clear, not by a long shot. We're still looking for the gun that killed Miss Elwain, and when we find it . . ."

He left the rest unsaid. He didn't have to finish. I knew exactly what he meant.

"Thanks for nothing," I said sarcastically, and ducked under the desk to retrieve my handkerchief from the mouthpiece of the dictaphone. His eyes were narrow slashes of speculation as he watched me take Sue's arm and walk from the room. I looked around for Gallagher or Krass, but saw neither of them.

DAWN was a bleak gray smudge as we reached Sue's apartment. They had taken Lillian's body to the

morgue, but the outline of her body was still imprinted against the bed. Enough of her stuff had been left intact by the cops to give me something to pore over.

There were no papers in her purse, but I did find something that interested me. A small vial of medicine. It was tightly corked and sealed. The druggist's name and the serial number of the prescription was on the label.

I rejoined Sue in the living room and showed her the bottle, inquiring whether Lillian had been sick. Sue shook her head puzzledly.

"No," she frowned, "Lillian was in perfect health. I'm certain if she'd seen a doctor she would have told me."

We left the apartment, locked it, and Sue went to a hotel to spend the night. I ambled over to the Kleinfeld Pharmacy. Luckily they were open all night, and I found a sleepy-eyed clerk behind the counter. I showed him the tiny bottle and asked him to look it up.

The patient's name was Luther Pringle, he lived on West Street and had been attended by a Doctor Skeene. I got the doctor's telephone number and eased into the booth at the back of the store.

The doctor was sore at being awakened at that hour. I prodded his memory by telling him the call was official, police business. It took him a moment to recall the circumstances.

"Ah, yes," he grumbled petulantly. "Luther Pringle, a queer old man, visiting with relatives, a Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Pringle. I prescribed amyl nitrate."

"What's that for, doctor?"

"It's a stimulant inhaled by patients with a bad heart. I don't think old Luther has long to go. He should never have made the trip from California."

"Do you recall what Mrs. Pringle looks like, doctor?"

The doctor's voice became enthusiastic. "Splendid looking woman, very beautiful, fine figure, blonde hair."

I hung up, went outside and flagged a cab. I gave the driver the Pringle address on West Street and a short time later we pulled up before a newly built apartment house. The lobby was all shiny chromium and imitation paneling.

I got the apartment number from the bank of letter boxes and took the self-service elevator to the ninth floor. I pushed my finger against the bell until the door opened and a slender handsome chap in creased pajamas opened the door. He stood there, knuckling his eyes and trying to finger his mussed dark hair into place.

I pushed into the apartment and closed the door. "Say, what is this?" he demanded.

I crossed down the hall into the bedroom. The wide double bed was empty. He yanked at my sleeve, twisting me around.

I said: "Where's your wife?"

He straightened as if I'd poured ice water down his spine. "Wife! Are you crazy? I haven't any wife."

"Where's the old man?" I asked.

"You mean Uncle Luther? He returned to California yesterday."

I sucked in a long breath. "The doctor who attended your uncle said you had a wife. What happened to her?"

He frowned and then suddenly he was smiling. "I understand now. That was just a friend of mine. She was very solicitous about Uncle Luther's health when he got an attack and I guess the doctor misunderstood."

I gave it to him straight. "Her name was Lillian Elwain."

His dark eyes narrowed. "How do you know. We keep it a secret."

I said: "Certain things I found gave me that information."

He hunched up his shoulders. "As long as the cat's out of the bag, you may as well know. We're engaged. It was her idea to keep it quiet, not mine. And now, please, just what do you want?"

"To find out who killed her," I said softly.

His jaw fell slack. "K-killed Lillian. You're kidding."

I gave a harsh laugh. "Not about

this. She was murdered last night. I've been accused of doing the job."

"But if you've been accused, how come you're free?"

"They didn't have enough evidence to hold me. I need your help. Certainly she must have told you something about herself, her friends, whether she was afraid of anybody." I told him the whole story then, all about Sue and myself, what had happened.

He listened to every word, grim-lipped, his face pale, his long body tense with emotion. When I was finished he said: "I was in love with Lillian. I'll do everything I can to find out who killed her. If I find it was you, Abbott, I'm coming after you and I'll kill you with my bare hands."

He told me then how he'd met her in the Blue Chip Club, how he'd started to take her out soon after, and how they'd fallen in love. But he could tell me nothing definite, nothing I could sink my teeth into.

Although I'd had no sleep for twenty-four hours and fatigue was begininng to paralyze my muscles, there was an insistent drive inside that kept urging me on. I cabbed over to the main telephone exchange and asked to look through the telephone directories for the principal California cities. I was there for about an hour and then I made a long distance telephone call.

I learned precisely nothing.

THEN I headed home to get some shut-eye. I fumbled my key into the lock, swung the door open and because the room looks out into a narrow court I reached for the light switch and clicked it on. I stiffened as the light failed to illuminate the room, then caught a blur of motion to one side. I lunged forward, throwing my arm up.

A stab of orange-red flame boomed beside me. I didn't even hear the sound of the gun or feel the searing pain of the bullet as it cut a furrow across my forehead. I tumbled into sudden blackness.

The sharp smell made me pinch my nostrils and heave upright. The light was on now, and I was not alone. The room was jammed. There was Sergeant Gallagher, Krass, a couple of h a r n e s s bulls, Mark Gissing, the D. A., assorted print men and photographers.

And the guy on the floor.

He'd been shot through the teeth and he was not a pleasant sight. He'd been ugly enough alive. I pushed the doctor away and staggered to my feet. I couldn't tear my eyes from the dead man's face.

"That—that's the guy," I croaked.

"What guy?" Gallagher asked.

"Wolf-face! The one who was hanging around outside Lillian Elwain's apartment just before she was murdered."

"You didn't m e n t i o n anything about him before."

"Of course not. I didn't think it important. There was nothing to connect him with her death. But now—"

Krass said: "He saw you there?"

I nodded.

"Hah! Just what I figured. He probably had the dope on you and you had to knock him off."

"Me—" I started to say, but Gissing cut me short with that cold, flat voice of his.

"You know what we do to cop killers in this town, Abbott?"

"Cop!" I swallowed, staring at the corpse.

"That's right," Gallagher said in a hard voice. "Luden here was a special dick attached to the D. A.'s office. The .38 that smoked him out was fitted with a silencer and that gun was found in your hand. Lillian was also shot with a .38, and Ballistics is checking the slug against it now. As we see it, your wound came from Luden's police positive. I guess you were just a little quicker on the draw than he was."

A lump rose in my throat and wedged my tongue down so that for a moment I couldn't speak and could hardly breathe. I had no doubt that the silenced gun would prove to be the

weapon that had killed Lillian. The strands of the net were getting a stranglehold. Whoever had framed me had done a thorough job, was making certain I'd wind up with a metal bowl over my head.

White muscle showed around Gallagher's jaws. Krass was rubbing his hands, and Mark Gissing's icy eyes were bereft of expression. My thoughts were badly scrambled, a little confused. I pressed my hands to my head, found bandages wrapped around it like a cocoon.

If Luden worked out of Gissing's office, what was he doing around Lillian's apartment, and more important, what had he been doing in my room? Why had he been killed? By whom? Those were questions that had to be answered—and soon.

If Gissing was out to get me, he could drop the Elwain case and concentrate on the murder of the detective. The evidence there was enough to convince any jury. The murder weapon had been found in my hand. The motive seemed clear-cut, to keep him from disclosing any information he might have found out.

Scared? I was petrified. I didn't want to burn, especially for a crime I had not committed. And then, suddenly, through the splitting pain, the whole thing seemed crystal clear.

I wet my lips and said: "I want to make a statement."

Gissing lifted his brows. Krass sucked in his breath and pulled out a pad and pencil. "You gonna confess?"

"Would it make it any easier if I did?"

Gissing nodded shortly. "The difference between the electric chair and a life sentence."

I forced a lump down my throat. "If anybody gets any credit on this thing I want it to be Gallagher. He's the only one who's been decent to me. I'll make my statement to him alone or the hell with it."

Krass' face darkened. Gissing pursed his mouth, eyeing me obliquely as if trying to probe what was in my mind. I stood my ground in front of them, sullenly. It was several seconds before Gissing spoke, then he said, "Okay," and nodded toward the bathroom.

GALLAGHER guided me into the narrow room, perched himself on the edge of the tub, lit a cigaret and stuck it between his lips, left it hanging there. He watched me through the upward swirl of smoke.

"Shoot, Abbott."

I said earnestly: "I didn't kill Luden, neither did I kill Miss Elwain, but I know who did."

"Who?" He put the question wearily, like a man who's often heard guys trying to pass the buck.

I gave it to him bluntly. "Mark Gissing."

He almost fell over backward into the bathtub, almost but not quite. The cigaret dropped out of his mouth. "I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "I certainly got to hand it to you, Abbott. You sure pick 'em, don't you?"

"Listen," I pressed, "listen to me. You don't like Gissing. Here's a chance to put him where he belongs. He was madly in love with Lillian Elwain. You didn't know that, but then very few people did. They'd kept it under their hats. I can get snapshots to prove it.

"And here's something else I can prove. She'd just ditched him. He's not the kind of guy to let a girl walk out on him before he's finished with her. He was jealous. He sneaked into her apartment and killed her.

"He didn't mean to frame me, not until he found out I was under suspicion anyway. He probably came here to plant the gun in my room. Luden was at the scene of the crime. If you ask me, he saw something and maybe he was trying to blackmail Gissing. Gissing lured him here and shot him, then waited for me. Luckily I ducked forward and his bullet didn't kill me."

I stopped, out of breath. Gallagher's

eyes were hard and bright. "You have pictures?"

I nodded.

"Does Miss Kinney know about it?"

"Yes."

"Did she know that Miss Elwain had handed Gissing his walking papers?"

I shook my head. "No, but I can produce the fellow Lillian was ditching him for."

Excitement glowed in Gallagher's face. "Who is he?"

"Chap by the name of Ralph Pringle." I gave him the address on West Street.

"Does he know she's been killed?"

"Yes. I told him and he was all broken up about it."

Gallagher looked thoughtful. He tugged on his lower lip, said: "This is going to be a hard nut to crack, Abbott. Even if everything you've told me is true, there isn't a shred of evidence that will hold up in court to prove that Gissing was involved in the actual killing. As it stands now, you're boxed in on all sides, a cinch to fry in the big house. The only thing that will break the case against you is an eye-witness who saw the shooting. And if there was such an eye-witness. . ." He stopped and spread his hands.

"He's dead," I finished blankly.

Gallagher nodded. "Unless we can figure out some trick to make Gissing give himself up. That, however, is improbable because he's smart, very smart—and dangerous."

I looked at him hopelessly, not speaking.

Gallagher stood up. "I'm going to get Ralph Pringle and let him confront Gissing. If sparks fly, all the better. One of them might ignite."

He led me back to the other room. Two cops were staggering out under the weight of a wicker basket. The print men and the photographers had departed. A cop stood guard outside, but within the room only Krass and the district attorney remained.

Gissing held his hand. "You have the confession, Gallagher?"

Gallagher shook his head. "Abbott changed his mind. He refused to talk."

The district attorney hunched forward. "What did he tell you?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing," returned Gallagher. "He's in your hands from now on." He shrugged and walked from the room.

KRASS followed him as far as the door, closed it and turned the key in the lock. His eyes sought the D. A. who gave an imperceptible nod. And then Krass hit me. His big fist crashed full against the bony point of my chin, slamming me back. I brought up against the wall, my eyes burning, the hatred eating my insides like acid.

"There's more where that came from," Gissing said. "What did you tell Gallagher?"

I spit out some blood and said: "Nothing."

"You'd better talk if you ever want to see the Kinney girl again."

"Sue!" I breathed. "What's she got to do with this?"

"Plenty," Gissing snapped. "An election is coming up soon and I've taken her into—shall I say—protective custody. I don't want my name linked with any scandal until the votes are in. She knows too much."

I said through clenched teeth: "Gissing, if anything happens to Sue, I'll get out of this jam somehow and so help me I'll kill you."

The back of Krass' hand left a red welt across my face. "Talk polite," he admonished.

"What did you tell Gallagher?" the D. A. repeated.

I clamped my lips and stared at him.

Gissing took off his coat, folded it carefully, laid it neatly across the bed. He possessed a huge torso, hard as stone, and evidently he'd kept it in good shape. He rolled up the sleeves

of his shirt and advanced upon me slowly. Krass kept a wary eye on me to see that I didn't fight back.

"I'm going to send you to the chair," Gissing's voice was hoarse, almost inhuman, "I'm going to watch you burn, Abbott, but first I'm going to do something that has to be done. I'm going to beat you within an inch of your miserable life."

And then he was upon me, an inferno of brutal violence. I shall never forget what happened as long as I live. I tried to fight back, but Gissing had too much weight and power. His fists battered against my face and body till I was bruised and bleeding in a dozen places. My cheeks were gashed and one eye was swollen shut.

I struck back blindly and had the satisfaction of feeling my knuckles crunch against his nose, but it wasn't long before I sagged limply to the floor.

Gissing walked into the bathroom and I heard water running into the basin. When he came back he pulled on his coat and straightened his tie. He stood over me and looked down.

"Supposing you talk now, Abbott," he said. He appeared to be more calm. "What did you tell Gallagher? Krass here is just aching for a crack at you."

I stayed on the floor and kept my mouth shut. I knew I would have to endure any punishment they wanted to dish out. Telling him of my suspicions would be to invite certain death. Gissing would put a bullet through me and say that I got it trying to escape.

He gave me a chance to think it over, but before he got started again there was a knock on the door. The guard outside admitted Gallagher, who'd brought Ralph Pringle with him. Gallagher looked at me and his face darkened.

"I thought that stuff went out with the Spanish Inquisition," he said to Gissing.

The D. A. shrugged. "Abbott got tough, tried to grab Krass' gun, and we had to rough him up a bit."

The curve of Gallagher's mouth expressed his contempt. "I want to introduce you to somebody, Gissing. This is Ralph Pringle, who'd been beating your time with Lillian Elwain —the guy she'd ditched you for."

Gissing's face was bleak. "How did you know about that?"

"What difference does it make? I know it and what's more I can prove it."

Gissing walked over to Pringle, stared closely into his face, then sent his huge fist crashing into it. Pringle fell as if his legs had been jerked from under him. Gallagher heaved forward and got into Gissing's path. He clawed a gun from under his coat and let it hang in his hand.

"Gissing," he said tightly, "I don't give a damn whether you're the D. A. or not. We're going to settle this thing here and now. I think you—"

The telephone rang. He walked over to it, picked up the receiver, listened a moment and then held it out toward me. I weaved over on loose knees, said: "Hello," and heard a scratchy voice ask if I was Frank Abbott. I said I was and then began asking questions. When I hung up, my brain was reeling under the impact of what I had just learned.

I turned around and stared at Pringle. "That was *your* Uncle Luther."

I didn't have to tell him because he'd heard the conversation. His brow had gathered into a questioning frown and his eyes were wide open.

I said: "He wasn't home when I called the first time so I left a message for him to call me back." I stopped and felt my nostrils pinch against an indrawn breath. "He'd come here to see you and to meet your wife. You told him you were married to Lillian because he wouldn't name you as his heir until he was sure you'd settled down. You got her to play the part."

Pringle bobbed his head and his voice had a sharp edge on it. "That's right. What about it? I didn't kill her."

I faced Mark Gissing. His heavy jowls were working furiously. I asked: "What was L u d e n doing around Lillian Elwain's apartment?"

WITHOUT taking his eyes off Pringle, Gissing said slowly: "She'd been avoiding dates with me lately so I sent Luden to find out who she'd been going with. Yesterday was the first day. He'd been waiting for her to come home."

"You came to my a p a r t m e n t, Pringle," I threw at him, "to find out what evidence I had connecting you with Lillian Elwain. Your uncle had asked her to refill his prescription and forward it to him. It was a vial of medicine. I guess Luden had been tailing me and followed me to your apartment. Then he switched over to you and dogged you here. He walked in on you and you had to kill him. You thought it would make a perfect frame so you waited for me to come home."

Gissing's breath came hard. He was still watching Pringle, but his words were addressed to me. "I let you go, Abbott, stressing the importance of the gun, hoping if you hadn't ditched it, you'd make the attempt. I put Luden on your tail to see what happened."

Pringle's face was deathly white. "What are you trying to do to me? You haven't any proof that I killed Lillian."

Gallagher stirred forward. "Maybe you never heard of the nitrate test. It shows who fired a gun recently. Abbott's going to take it, Gissing's going to take, and so are you, Pringle."

For the space of a single heartbeat there wasn't a sound in the room and then Pringle uttered a wild cry and lunged toward the door. Krass nailed him with a rabbit-blow behind the ear and sent him staggering to his knees. Pringle stayed there, his face contorted horribly and then he whimpered:

"She tried to blackmail me. She wanted me to give her a promissory note for half of my uncle's money. I had to do it—I had to—"

Gallagher bent over and handcuffed him to the steampipe. His eyes were hard and narrow as he confronted the district attorney. "Why did you beat up Abbott?"

Gissing squared his great shoulders haughtily, thought a moment, and then decided to answer. "Because I loved that girl, dammit, and I thought he had killed her."

I coasted toward him, plucked at his lapels. "Where is she—where's Sue?"

He pushed my hands away. "Up at my country place. She's safe enough. I haven't harmed her. Everything's all right."

"Not exactly," said Gallagher softly. "That's up to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Maybe they'll want to make a kidnapping charge out of it."

And they did too. Mark Gissing ended up where he belonged—in clink. We found Sue scared, but unharmed. Krass spent three weeks in a hospital after I tripped him going down the stairs. Gallagher, who was made a lieutenant, never cracked a smile at that. He wasn't a man who opened up easily. We couldn't even get him to do it when he was best man at our wedding.

You'll thrill to the new novelet

By H. Q. MASUR

THE CORPSE HANGS HIGH

A Gripping Tale of Dames, Diamonds and Double-Cross

NEXT MONTH **TEN DETECTIVE ACES**

Laughter From Hell

By Guy Fleming

A practical joker stood between Vic Florian and the de luxe prize he wanted. So to rid himself of this funny-man intruder, Vic pulled a gag of his own—a gag taken from the Grim Reaper's jokebook.

VIC FLORIAN spotted the group of laughing people the instant he entered Pete's Tavern. He stood stiffly for a moment before drifting to the bar, a strange mixture of emotions twisting inside him.

Linda Massey was at the table and the sight of her left an empty vacuum in his stomach. Her face was gay with laughter, and shining lights danced in her soft brown eyes. The two other couples at the table were convulsed with mirth at the antics of her escort, Barney Kane.

Vic Florian clenched his teeth against the hatred that threatened to explode inside him. It was Barney Kane, the life of the party, the great practical joker, the amateur funny man, who had blasted Vic Florian's plans for Linda Massey. Florian had been top man in her life until he'd been cut out by Kane.

The sight of Kane now was a sharp wind whipping the smouldering ashes of Vic Florian's bitterness into flame. He strode to the bar, slapped down a bill, demanded straight rye. Through the mirror behind the bartender he could see Linda's glowing face. He remembered the night she'd told him about her engagement, trying to let him down easy. And he remembered also how the acid of frustration had eaten away his ambitions.

Linda's father was the local banker. Vic Florian had been counting on his financial help once he was the old man's son-in-law. So certain had he been of it that he'd over-expanded his real estate business and was now hard-pressed for cash, stood to lose most of his holdings.

He'd argued with her. "You'll be marrying a clown, Linda, a guy who'd cut off his toe for a gag. His idea of a joke is to let the air out of ambulance tires. Maybe right now you think he's funny, but wait till you're married for a couple of years. Listen to me, Linda, I'm going places in this town. I'll be the richest man in the county. Be smart and drop Kane."

Linda shook her head. "I'm sorry, Vic, but I love Barney. That's the way it is. He'll settle down after we're married, you'll see."

Both of them knew she was kidding herself. Barney Kane would never change. He was a born prankster, a guy who lived for laughs. Scarcely a native of Roedale had escaped being his victim at one time or another. Sometimes his antics were funny and sometimes they were dull. It never seemed to make much difference to Barney Kane. He always got a big kick out of every stunt he pulled. He was far and away his own best audience.

Over the rim of his glass Vic Florian watched the group at the table. Barney Kane's fingers were inserted into a tiny cloth monkey and he was manipulating its head and arms, asking it questions and answering in a

high, squeaky voice like a ventriloquist.

"He'll always be a small-town comedia ," Vic Florian thought and the pain sharpened against his wounded ego.

Watching them like that required more fortitude than he possessed so he tossed off his third drink and slipped into the night. He sat grimly behind the wheel of his car, driving fast. He had traveled perhaps less than a mile when his mind reached the decision.

He was going to kill Barney Kane.

IT WAS not a new idea. Subconsciously he'd been playing with it for some time. Roedale was a small town and did not boast of many eligible bachelors. With Kane eliminated, he—Vic Florian—would again be the top man. Of course the cards must be played right. Sympathy. Understanding. A slow process of insinuation. Linda Massey was not the kind of girl who'd mourn her life away as an old maid. She'd favored him once. She'd do so again.

In bed that night, a cigar stabbed between his teeth and glowing fitfully in the darkness, Vic Florian laid out his campaign.

The following day, Sunday, was raining, the kind of chilled, bleak day that keeps people indoors. Vic Florian took one last look to see that everything was set. The decanter of liquor, the two glasses, the small white tablet in his pocket—chloral hydrate. He picked up the phone and dialed Barney Kane's number.

Kane was surprised to hear his voice. After the engagement had been announced, Vic Florian had cut him dead on the street and they hadn't spoken much since then.

"Well, well, Vic, old boy!" he exclaimed. "It's good to hear your voice. What's up?"

Florian said modestly: "I've been thinking. There's no sense acting like a kid. You busy right now, Barney?"

"Not until this evening."

"Swell. I want your advice and maybe I can throw some business your way. I took an option on some property last week and I'd like to find out about the insurance rates. Maybe you can drive over and I'll tell you about it."

"In twenty minutes, keed," Barney said. "Just like old times, what?"

Vic Florian was smiling as he hung up. Barney Kane had been his insurance agent for three years. There was really nothing strange in calling him now. He'd find out after Barney arrived whether anyone knew that he'd been here. If anyone did, the plan would be discarded for a later date.

He was peering through the window when Barney's car came hurtling through a sheet of aluminum-colored rain. Brakes screamed and the tires locked against loose gravel, peppering the front of the house. That was the way Barney Kane drove and it was part of the plan.

Kane breezed in, his big face wreathed in smiles, a joke ready with his greeting. It was an old joke and Florian had heard it before but he forced a chuckle and took Kane's broad palm. They went into the living room and sat down. Florian poured a drink, took the humidor from the smoking table and offered Kane a cigar.

When they were settled in chairs he extracted the information that Kane had driven directly over without telling anyone where he was headed. "Boy!" he grinned. "Linda'll be happy that we're friends again."

They smoked and talked for a while, then Florian described the house he said he was buying and the type of insurance he'd require. Barney Kane made some figures and gave him a rough estimate. When Florian went to pour another drink he kept his back toward Kane.

It was done. The tablet dissolved quickly. He extended the glass, watched while it was tossed off, and then settled back to wait. The drink took effect right in the middle of a

joke. Kane's eyelids dragged down, his voice dribbled away, he slumped back in the chair, his chin sagging against his chest.

He would be out, Vic Florian estimated, for at least a half hour. That gave him more than enough time, but he hurried just the same. Quickly he secured the keys to Kane's car. He ducked outside, drove it into the garage beside his own car, and went to work. His mechanical knowledge now stood him in good stead.

His fingers moved with feverish haste. In a short time the job was done. He slid out from under the car, straightened his back, took off the slicker he'd worn to protect his clothes and carefully backed the car out again into the driveway.

WHEN he returned to the living room he found that Barney Kane was just beginning to stir again. He replaced the car keys, grabbed up the liquor glass, washed it in the kitchen, returned it to the table beside Kane.

About five minutes later Kane's eyes fluttered open. He tasted his mouth, asked: "What the hell happened? I got dizzy."

Vic Florian shrugged. "Yes, so I noticed. I thought you were going to get sick. Maybe liquor doesn't agree with you."

"Me?" Kane boasted. "Hell, Vic, I can drink you under the table and you know it." To prove his statement he lifted the decanter and took a swig directly from the bottle. An examination of his strap watch led to a: "Whew! It's late. I've got to be going." He shrugged into his coat, shook hands and lowered his head against the downpour.

Through the window Vic Florian saw him sitting behind the wheel a moment before he started the car. The motor roared into action, gears meshed, then the machine spurted heedlessly backward down the driveway into the road. It careened into a turn and disappeared.

Vic Florian sank into a chair and wiped the moisture that had suddenly gathered upon his forehead. It was done. No turning back now. In about twenty minutes the car would be a twisted wreck, and somewhere inside it would be lying the body of Barney Kane, broken and dead.

Vic Florian had another drink to steady his nerves. Just one. The last. He must have a clear head to contend with any contingency. Minutes passed and a surge of triumph swept over him. Everything had gone smoothly. It couldn't have gone better if he had written it out as a play.

He knew where Barney Kane was headed. Linda Massey's home was on the other side of Redo Hill. They called it a hill but it was really a mountain. The road was a tortuous snake winding upward to the top. It fell steeply then, crossing the railroad grading after a sharp turn. Barney Kane would crowd the brake, but nothing would happen.

Instead the car would gather momentum, become a rocketing mass of destruction. Vic Florian caught his breath. He could see the whole picture clearly. Barney Kane's white, distorted face. The frantic foot stamping against the brake pedal. The windshield wiper shearing water from the glass so Kane might see the trees rushing past him and the red blur of death in front of him.

No jokes now. No gags. No stunts at somebody else's expense. There would be the thunderous, ripping crash of tortured metal, and afterward the deep well of silence broken only by the sound of pattering rain against smouldering ruins.

Vic Florian did not know how long he sat there like that, but it must have been for some considerable time. The significance of what he had done was overwhelming and had left him in a sort of stupor. He had interfered with destiny, taken over God's job, and a queer feeling of omniscience was upon him. The sudden ringing of

the doorbell jerked him into awareness.

He stared at the two bulky figures sheathed in long damp slickers and put a surprised note into his voice. "Sheriff Thorne!" he exclaimed. "This is a surprise. What brings you here?"

Thorne pushed into the room, followed by his deputy. The two men took off their hats and flipped off the water. Thorne had a long wedge-shaped face, hard and shrewd. He came directly to the point.

"We're investigatin' a murder, Vic. Maybe you can help us."

"Murder!" Vic Florian opened his eyes wide. "Who? What?"

"Barney Kane. His car went off the grading on Redo Hill. Crashed down in the valley. Busted to pieces."

Florian wet his lips. "Maybe it was an accident."

The sheriff shook his head. "That's what we thought at first. Then Mac down at the garage said he couldn't understand it. He tightened the brakes on Barney's car only yesterday. We had a look at 'em and it was clear as daylight somebody's deliberately loosened 'em."

VIC FLORIAN forced a long drawn-out whistle between his lips. His brain was working hard. Did the sheriff suspect him because he knew there had been hard feelings between the two men, that Barney Kane had beaten his time with a girl? He had to appear nonchalant, cool. Everything might depend upon the next few seconds. He walked over to the humidor and extracted a cigar. He lit it, sending out a stream of smoke.

"Why me?" he asked. "How can I help you?"

Thorne's eyes were direct. "You seen Barney lately?"

Florian shook his head. "Not for a couple of months. Everybody knows that. Why do you ask?"

Thorne took a small black notebook from his pocket. "Found this in Barney's coat. It has some notes in it about quoting insurance rates on a piece of property you got an option on. The owner didn't ask him so we figured it might have been you."

Vic Florian sucked in a long breath. So that's what Barney had been doing in the driveway before he started the car. Well, that was no evidence. They didn't have anything on him, nothing to prove he'd been anywhere near Barney's car.

He nodded slowly. "Matter of fact I phoned Barney today and asked him about that insurance. He's sold me every policy I got, you know."

Sheriff Thorne stroked his chin. "Then you're sure you ain't seen Barney lately at all."

Vic Florian jabbed the cigar between his teeth. "Of course I'm sure." He was gaining confidence. "I can do business with him without seeing him, can't I? It's no secret we've been on the outs. I wouldn't want Barney Kane in my house. After what he did to me there isn't—"

And then it happened.

There was a muffled explosion like the sound of a fire cracker. Smoke fanned out in front of Vic Florian's face and when it cleared his lips and nose were black with powder. He still held between his teeth the frayed and torn cigar. Above it his eyes were like saucers, wide, ridden with fear.

Barney Kane, the amateur funny man, the great practical joker, must have placed the loaded cigar in his humidor. Vic saw Sheriff Thorne's eyes narrow and his jaw harden with understanding. Panic flared through him. He whirled and bolted toward the back door. A single shot cracked out and he felt his shattered leg snap under him. Even as he fell he was cursing Barney Kane's sense of humor.

Satan's Jackpot

Unique Novelet

By Wyatt Blassingame

Mystery and chill menace brooded ominously over the little island of Lonesome Key. For grasping fingers shuffled the death cards—and dealt a homicide hand for two.

I

CLOUDS blowing across the moon dragged their shadows beneath them, so that one moment the gulf was all black and the next moment it was silver-tinted with little waves breaking on the beach in running lines of cold white fire. The boy and girl stood where the beach shelved back into low sand dunes overgrown with sea oats. There was a wind blowing and the sea oats made dry faint clashing noises like the clash of palm fronds. The boy said :

"I'd better go. I promised Jane and Miss Mary I'd come back soon. Jane wants to get off tonight so she can go into Bradenton to the picture show."

Marcia Gilson made an imitation

pout. "Sometimes I think you're in love with Jane," she said.

But he was very serious, staring out at the water, black now while clouds covered the moon. "I used to think so myself sometimes—before I met you."

"And now?"

He looked down at her, his face drawn, serious, intent. "You know now." And then he said, as if the words hurt with physical pain, "I wish you weren't so damn rich!"

She was a beautiful girl, tall, though she gave the appearance of smallness, and exquisitely blonde; but now her face, which had held an expression of playful questioning a moment before, became abruptly sullen.

"Rich!" she said angrily. "Filthy rich! And I can't get a dime of it without practically going on my knees to that damn uncle of mine. I even have to come to this forsaken little island in June rather than go to Newport—because P.B. likes the tarpon fishing here!"

"I'm glad you came," Tom Harris said.

But she was still thinking of the injustice which her father had done by leaving her fortune in the uncle's control. "Until I'm twenty-five!" she said fiercely. "Three more years! And by that time there won't be a dollar left, the way he's going now. Planning to give a hundred thousand dollars, of *my* money, to this crook Alan Dwight!"

"Give it to him? What do you mean?"

"It would amount to that. Some fool scheme of Alan's. He claims he can set up a factory that will beat the government out of millions on rearmament business. He says he's got Washington connections that will get the orders. He hasn't got a damn thing but a plan to get a hundred thousand dollars of my money. And that stupid P.B. is going to fall for it!"

"Has your uncle already given Mr. Dwight the money?"

"Not yet, though nothing but death can keep him from it."

And then she stood staring out over the water as though fascinated by what she had said.

After a while he said, "I'd better get on back to The Anchorage and go to work. You'll come up later?"

"I'll try to."

HE LEFT her standing there among the tall sea oats and turned north along the beach, walking close to the water where the sand was hard-packed. A quarter of a mile away the neon light of The Anchorage, the small, respectable juke joint which he had owned and operated ever since he came South for his health three years before, spread a faint red smear upon the sky.

He had gone perhaps three hundred yards when he heard a voice cry out somewhere behind him. He looked back, but the moon was buried in clouds now and for a few seconds he could see nothing. He could hear nothing but the surge of the small waves on the beach and he decided he had been mistaken about hearing anything else.

He had been thinking about Marcia, wishing she was with him, and perhaps he had wished himself into hearing her coming after him. He shrugged, was about to turn toward The Anchorage again, and—

The moon ripped free of clouds. The light poured down on the long white beach and he saw the man not more than fifty yards away, running hard but staggering as though exhausted, and waving his arms. A fattish man, bareheaded and bald, the moonlight gleaming on his head.

It was by the bald head that Tom could recognize him as P. B. Malone, Marcia's uncle. He clutched something white and bow-shaped in one hand.

From the edge of the sea oats back of and beyond Malone, a gun cracked sharply three times. Tom Harris could see the little jets of fire. Still

running, P. B. Malone began to reel sideways toward the water, waving his arms more than ever and still holding the white object.

From the sea oats, the gun cracked again. Malone was staggering ankle-deep in the surf now, the water exploding outward from around his feet like tiny light bulbs bursting. Then his fat body was too far ahead of his feet and he went over face down, and the surf washed around him and receded and came back to slush around him again.

Instinctively Tom Harris started toward where the man lay. His mind was too shocked, too numb for any thought at all.

Then the little point of fire bloomed among the sea oats again and a bullet made an angry sound inches from Tom's left ear and the thunderclap of the shot burst around him.

He flung himself desperately backward. He stumbled in the sand and fell and the next bullet whipped a foot overhead. Then clouds slid silently over the moon again and he was erect and running toward the shelter of the sea oats, but away from the spot where he had seen the red light of gunfire.

He crouched in the sea oats, trembling now, feeling afraid although he'd had no time for fear while the bullets keened around him. There was the sound of the surf, the dry faint clashing of the sea oats overhead, but nothing else.

He could see the dark shadow of P. B. Malone's body lying face down at the edge of the water. The body trembled a little as the waves rolled around and past it.

TOM stayed there for what seemed like years. The gentle surf and the wind in the sea oats was the only sound. If anyone at The Anchorage or in the scattered houses along the beach had heard the shots they had paid no attention to them, mistaking them for the backfire of a car or someone practicing pistol shooting at a tin can perhaps. The idea of crime would hardly occur to anybody on Lonesome Key, the idea of murder. . . .

Tom licked his dry lips. There was a chance that Mr. Malone was not dead, but he would certainly be dead soon if left there in the surf. Yet if the person who had shot him was still watching, it would be suicide to try to reach Mr. Malone.

The memory of death whispering inches from him was like a knife in Tom's stomach. He had never been shot at before, never been in violent physical danger before. He had led the ordinary life of a young, middle-class American, except that troubled by arthritis he had come to Lonesome Key for his health.

But I'm the deputy here, he thought. *I'm supposed to do something.*

He was deputy because the sheriff had had to appoint someone on the key, and had appointed Tom. Tom didn't even have a gun. The only duty he'd ever had to perform was to direct traffic one afternoon after a ship had run aground here and everybody from Bradenton had driven out to look at it.

But still I'm deputy. I've got to do something!

He stood up, half crouching so that at no time would he be above the sea oats, and began to move down the beach toward the spot where the shots had been fired. He went silently, cautiously, and his heart seemed to have swollen until there was no room for it in his chest and it ached against his ribs.

Then finally he was at the point where the murderer had stood, or very close to it. The moon was clear and he could see for several yards in each direction: the sea oats striping the sand with mooncast shadows, and nothing else.

He began to breathe easier now, to move faster and with more certainty and soon he found the tracks. But whoever had made them had taken

time leaving, to smear them over so that they were only clean-wiped splotches. He followed them for fifty yards to where they ended on a concrete sidewalk which connected the scattered beach houses.

Turning, he raced back through the sea oats and across the white strip of beach to where P. B. Malone lay. The sand had washed out around him until he lay in a shallow hole, the body stirring sluggishly to the ebb and flow of the surf.

Tom had to strain to pull the big man above the water's edge. But he knew already Malone was dead. He had never seen death before and yet he knew it, would have known it even without the evidence of the two bullet holes in the back.

With hands that trembled a little he rolled the corpse over. And now he saw the white object still clutched in Malone's dead hand. It was a night-blooming cereus! It was crushed now and wet, but there was no mistaking its fragile, waxlike white blossom.

II

IN THE Anchorage a couple of kids danced to the music of the juke organ, a man named Hansen stood at the bar, and Jane Arthur was waiting on him when Tom entered and went directly to the phone. He called the sheriff in Bradenton and told him what had happened. Sheriff O'Dowle said:

"There's gonna be a stink. It's sort of all right for the natives to knock off one another sometimes, but when the rich tourists start getting it, that's different. You keep your eye on the corpse and see don't nothing happen and I'll be right out."

Tom went out of the phone booth and spoke briefly to Hansen, then called Jane to one side.

"Where's Miss Mary?" he asked.

"I haven't seen her in the last half hour or so." The girl was staring at him. "Tom, what's wrong? You look so queer."

He told her what had happened. "I've got to go back down and—watch the corpse. But somebody ought to go to Malone's house and tell his wife and Marcia. I wish Miss Mary was here so she could go, or she could stay here while you went."

"I imagine she'll be back soon. She didn't tell me where she was going. I didn't even notice when she left."

"We can't wait for her."

He glanced out of the corner of his eyes toward Hansen who leaned on the bar, drinking beer. He didn't like Hansen, though he had no particular reason for disliking him.

The man sold real estate, just about ran the politics of the little town on Lonesome Key, and was generally thought to be as honest as a Japanese apology, though nobody had ever proved anything on him. But there was nobody else here. . . . Tom explained the situation to Hansen and asked if he would drive to the Malone house and notify them.

"Well, yes . . . ." Hansen said. He had a slow, deliberative way of talking. "Well, yes, I will."

He turned and went out so promptly, Tom thought: *He must have already figured a way to make money out of this. Maybe he's an agent for an undertaker.*

Jane put both her hands on Tom's arm now. "Can't you watch from here, Tom? Suppose you're down there by yourself and the—the murderer comes back—?"

"I don't think he'll be back," Tom said. "And the sheriff told me to watch so that nothing would happen." But she stood looking after him as he went out into the night again, and fear showed in her dark eyes and in her small, heart-shaped face.

The beach was filled with the dull whisper of the surf and the wind. The moonlight came and went fitfully. It seemed queer to Tom Harris that these things had not changed at all, that the beach was as empty and lonely as it had been—and yet a man lay here dead.

The sheriff will be here in about an hour, Tom thought, and thinking of this he began to wonder consciously for the first time who had killed P. B. Malone, and why, and why running with the murderer behind him, Malone had clutched the flower of a night-blooming cereus.

Tom had known the man fairly well. P.B. had been big, blustering, filled with respect for his own importance. He was not a man that you liked very much, yet neither was he the type to have violent enemies.

And then all at once Tom was remembering what Marcia had said: *Planning to give away a hundred thousand dollars of my money . . . . and nothing but death can stop him from it!*

The memory caught Tom's brain in a cold grip. Suppose Marcia had—suppose she— He couldn't finish the thought. He had left her standing in the sea oats not more than two or three hundred yards from the place where the murder took place.

But she had been going in the opposite direction. She should have been almost home, or at least a quarter of a mile away when it happened. He tried to laugh and shrug the thought aside. It was silly to have thoughts like that!

Two figures came out of the sea oats a hundred yards or so away and started down the beach toward him. He recognized Marcia instantly, as though his heart rather than his eyes had seen her. He went to meet her and as they approached he recognized the man with her also. It was Alan Dwight, the house guest who had been trying to borrow a hundred thousand dollars of Marcia's money from her uncle.

DWIGHT was in his middle forties, but looked younger. He was a tall man with hair so black it might have been dyed. His face was high-boned and sharp and handsome, but it looked set and furious now.

He strode past Tom without speaking and went directly to Malone's body and knelt beside it in the sand, staring at it and at the flower still clutched in the dead man's hand. He half turned the body so that he could see where the bullets had struck, then let the body down again and stood erect violently, hands clenched. His face was dark with fury as he stared at Tom Harris. "What do you know about this? You saw it? How did it happen?"

"I was down that way twenty or thirty yards," Tom said, "and Mr. Malone was running toward me. Whoever shot him was back over there at the edge of the sea oats, because I could see the flash of the gun."

"Over where? There?" Dwight started swiftly across the beach. He had a big flashlight in his hand now, the beam striking out in front of him.

"Wait a minute!" Tom Harris said. "The sheriff told me to keep everybody away until he got here."

Dwight swung sharply around. "I don't plan to let some hick sheriff mess this thing up! I've been robbed of a fortune by whoever committed this murder, and by damn, I at least want the satisfaction of sending him to the chair!" He whirled away and started across the beach again.

"Now wait," Tom said doggedly. "The sheriff said—"

He stopped going after the other man when Marcia caught his arm and stopped him. She stood very close in front of him. Her eyes were large and frightened.

"Tom. . . ."

"The sheriff told me to keep everybody away. I've got—"

"Alan won't do any harm. He was a kind of detective while he was in Hollywood, I think."

"But—"

"Tom you've got to do me a favor. Listen please." Her body was close against his so that he could smell her fragile exquisite perfume through the salt breath of the gulf. "Tom,

you've got to tell the sheriff I was with you when P.B. was shot."

"Got to—?" The words stopped in his mouth. Even his heart seemed to have stopped beating for a moment. "Why tell him that? Why lie to him?"

"Because he's going to think I killed P.B." She caught the front of Tom's shirt with both hands. "They all think I killed him—Alan and Aunt Sara and Mrs. Dwight. You should have seen them stare at me when that man—what's his name, Hansen?—told us P.B. was dead."

He did not speak. He kept looking at her. And she said slowly, "It's because I had threatened to kill him. Because he was going to use my money in this deal with Alan Dwight, and because he wouldn't give me what I wanted for a boat in Newport."

"But I can't tell the sheriff we were together," he said desperately. "I've already told Jane that I was alone, told Mr. Hansen I was alone."

"But wouldn't they keep quiet if you asked them? Wouldn't they let you tell the sheriff—?"

"Jane might, but not Mr. Hansen. At least, you couldn't trust him."

She shook her head wearily. "I suppose not. He didn't like P.B. They had some kind of quarrel over a real estate deal. But Alan Dwight's sure to tell the sheriff what I said about my uncle. I didn't mean it"—she was holding tight to Tom—"I was just talking. But Alan hates me because I've tried to keep P.B. from giving him that money. Won't you do something, Tom? Can't you tell the sheriff you could see me down the beach, or something?"

He kept staring at her. There was a pain in his chest and no matter how he tried to block it the thought kept returning: *Suppose she did, suppose she did. . . .*

The girl must have read the thought in his eyes for she said sharply, "No! No! I didn't shoot him!" Her hands shook at him, released his shirt and slid slowly outwards to rest on his arms and she swayed forward until her body was touching his. "You know I didn't, Tom."

HE PUT his arms fiercely around her. He wanted to curse himself for the suspicion which had been in his mind; he felt sick because of it. "Of course I know you didn't," he whispered.

"But the others are going to think—"

"I won't let them think it! I'll find out who really did it."

She pushed a little away from him then. Clouds were over the moon and he could scarcely see her face. After a moment she whispered:

"Who do you think it was?"

"I don't know. Did your uncle have any enemies, anybody who hated him?"

"Nobody that I know of, not enough to kill him."

"Didn't he have some money of his own, besides your money which he handled? Who gets it?"

"Aunt Sara." She took a deep breath. "Do you think she—?"

Alan Dwight loomed abruptly beside them. He ignored Tom. He stood tall and dark above the girl, looking down at her. There was a thin, tight smile on his mouth. He said:

"Well, it's your money now with P.B. gone. And I'm out a fortune, unless you want to make the deal with me."

"No."

"You think I'm a crook, but—"

"I know you are. Oh, I know you were a detective of sorts and a small-time movie director in Hollywood, and that you had some kind of political connections in New York. But I know you got her started on the dope habit so she'd be out of your way after that. She told me herself!"

For an instant the man's face was dark with fury, then he was smiling again. "There may be some slight truth in what you say, but you can never believe wives too completely—especially wives who take opium.

Aside from that, this proposal is legitimate. At least, I have the Washington connections who can get the orders the instant the factory is started. You'll get your hundred thousand back five times over."

"No."

There was no actual physical change in the man's face but somehow it was threatening now. He said, "I found the gun over there that your uncle was killed with. It's the .32 that you and he were using for target practice yesterday. The killer had buried it in the sand, but he—or she—must have done it in a hurry. They left a mound large enough to attract attention and I uncovered it."

His voice slid off into silence. He kept looking straight at the girl. Around them the soft noises of the surf beat gently. Alan Dwight said: "If I can find that someone else killed your uncle—or if I can make the police believe it was someone else, will you agree to the deal?"

For a long moment the girl did not answer. Finally she said, "We'll talk it over later. There's a car coming down the beach now. It's probably the sheriff."

III

MRS. SARA MALONE was a large, buxom woman with an oppressive air of joviality. Her hair was dark red and when she moved it was with a billowy motion both fore and aft. She had a loud voice, harsh from constant use. She said:

"Of course, sheriff, Marcia was only joking when she said that she felt like killing her uncle. I'm only telling you what she said because someone else might tell you and make it sound as if she was serious." She smiled at Marcia. "You understand that, Marcia, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Marcia said, and the words were acid.

Looking at them, Tom Harris thought that perhaps no family group had ever shown less grief over the sudden taking off of one of its members. At first Mrs. Malone had made some effort to work up a few tears, but failing, she had reverted to her customary loud good humor.

She had always gone in for people and noise and now she seemed as pleased to have the sheriff and one of his deputies and Tom Harris as if they had been old friends come to visit. Marcia sat in a big overstuffed chair away from the nearest floor lamp. In the shadows she looked tense and pale and beautiful.

Ellen Dwight sat to Marcia's left. She was a thin, nervous, faded woman. She looked at no one directly and her fingers kept twitching in her lap. When the sheriff asked where she had been at the time of the murder he had to repeat the question twice before she seemed to hear him. Then she said: "I—I don't know. Maybe I was upstairs in my room. I don't remember."

"It was between eight-ten and eight-twenty," the sheriff said. This fact had been brought out before.

"I don't remember. I was upstairs in my room, I expect." She picked nervously at her skirt, half stood up as though to leave, but sat down again when her husband said sternly:

"You can wait until the sheriff is through asking questions, Ellen."

He was the only person in the room who seemed to honestly regret P.B. Malone's death—and it was obvious this wasn't because of sentimental reasons but because of the prospective fortune which the death had cost him. He stood leaning against the mantel, almost casually graceful, but there was determination and anger in the set of his handsome, high-boned face.

Hansen, the man Tom had asked to notify them of Malone's death, had gone before the sheriff arrived.

The sheriff asked Marcia if she had heard the shots. For an instant Marcia did not answer, but when she did her voice was quite calm.

"I can't be sure. I keep thinking now that perhaps I did; but if I really

heard them I didn't pay any attention to them at the time."

TOM HARRIS felt the desire to shelter and protect this girl surge through him. It was obvious that the sheriff was beginning to suspect her, that he was held back from saying so only by the fact of her wealth and that he could afford to make no mistakes.

But Tom knew Sheriff O'Dowle, and he knew that no matter how much money was involved, the sheriff would stick to the investigation until it was settled.

O'Dowle said slowly, "You were walking back here from the place where you had talked to Tom, Miss Gilson. Just how far had you come when you heard the shots, or what you think now might have been the shots?"

"I must have been almost here. Out in the yard, I think."

Alan Dwight said calmly, "That's right. I can check that, sheriff."

They all stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I was just leaving the house and I saw Miss Gilson crossing the yard. We spoke to one another but didn't stop for any conversation. It was only a few seconds later when I heard the shots quite plainly—though naturally I didn't think at that time it was gunfire. I thought it was a car backfiring. I'm going to leave nothing undone to find the murderer, but I'm afraid we'll have to bar Miss Gilson."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" the sheriff asked.

"I just happened to think of it."

Marcia said huskily, "That's right, sheriff. I'm almost sure that's when I heard the shots."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Malone cheerfully, "that proves it couldn't have been any of us, unless it was Ellen—and Ellen never would do such a thing, would you, dear?"

She looked toward the chair where Ellen Dwight had been, but the chair was empty. Mrs. Dwight had left the room while everyone was staring at her husband.

In the rather surprised stillness that followed this Marcia said, "You haven't told us where you were, Aunt Sara. I didn't notice you when I came in."

For a moment Mrs. Malone's eyes were the dull red color of her hair. Then she was smiling again. "I was right here in the house, dear. Right in my room the whole evening."

The sheriff looked baffled and angry. These weren't his kind of people. It seemed as though nobody but he actually wanted the murderer found—nobody but he and the man Dwight, and now he wasn't sure of Dwight any longer. He said:

"About this flower Mr. Malone was carrying. Got any idea what he'd be carrying one of those around for?"

"He loved flowers," Mrs. Malone said. "I don't suppose anybody would have thought it, just to look at him, but actually he loved everything that was beautiful, didn't he, dear?" She looked at Marcia.

"Especially b l o n d e s out of choruses," Marcia said.

The sheriff shrugged and gave it up for the night. He'd already had Tom show him all the near-by places where night-blooming cereus grew, but a search had revealed nothing. He'd wait until daylight and try again. . . .

Tom wanted to talk to Marcia after the sheriff had gone, but she said, "I'm tired, darling. I'm going to bed."

"Wait a minute, please. If Alan Dwight saw you here in the yard at the time he heard the shots, how could he have thought you killed your uncle? And you said he thought you did, that they all thought you did. And that talk down there on the beach after he found the gun—?"

"He wanted to bluff me into saying I would go through with P.B.'s deal."

"But did he really see you here in the yard?"

She looked straight at him with big, blue, innocent eyes. "Of course, darling."

WHEN he left the house it was still a few minutes short of midnight. The clouds had blown away and the moon, dipping westward, rode clear; but in the yard palms and oleander and hibiscus made dark pools of shadow. It was a big yard and he walked slowly across it, thinking, trying to find some solution for what had happened tonight, trying to quiet the little recurrent nagging fear that came whenever he thought of Marcia.

Directly ahead of him the woman came from the shadow of a hibiscus into the moonlight. She seemed to float, ghostlike. She wore a white, shapeless dress and her pale hair hung loose about her face and shoulders.

She stopped in front of him, utterly still, quiet, staring at him with eyes from which the pupils seemed to have disappeared so that her eyes were only empty splotches in her face, like some character in the Little Orphan Annie comic strip. He recoiled, gaping at her before he realized it was Mrs. Alan Dwight.

"Oh, I—you surprised me," he said finally.

She came toward him with that strange, floating motion. Her face was completely blank, dreamlike. She put her hand on his and the hand was very cold. Her voice had a faraway sound.

"You are in love with Marcia?"

"Yes," Tom Harris said simply.

"She is cruel and a cheat. She can never love anyone except herself. She killed her uncle."

He tried to speak and the muscles of his throat were stiff. He had to swallow and the lump from his throat seemed to settle coldly in his stomach.

"You can't say that. She didn't kill him. Why do you say she did?"

"Because she is capable of murder. But there is a girl who works in your bar. I don't know her name, but I have seen the way she looks at you. Go to her. Keep away from Marcia."

She took her hand off his. She went by him in that curious, almost motionless walk.

She takes dope, Tom Harris thought. *That's what she got when she went out of the room. She's doped. She doesn't know what she is saying.*

He thought she was gone, but abruptly she was back again, touching his arm. "There is a night-blooming cereus in the back yard of Mr. Hansen's home," she said. And now she was gone, fading off into the shadow-splotched moonlight.

IV

TOM HARRIS walked by Hansen's home on his way back to The Anchorage. He remembered now that Hansen had a number of night-blooming cereus plants growing around the cabbage palms in his back yard. And the house was not more than two hundred and fifty yards from the place where the murder had occurred. Perhaps. . . .

The house stood dark and empty-looking. There were two royal palms in the front yard, leaning gracefully before the wind. Tom went around the house, making no particular attempt at silence, and into the back yard. There were four or five cabbage palms here and in the darkness beneath them he could see the ghostly glow of huge white blossoms.

He struck a match. The flaring light showed the snakelike plant twined about the tree. Buds made small furry spots on the plants; open blossoms—they would be dead by morning—gleamed with a dreadful whiteness.

The match flared out and he moved on to another tree and struck another match. Here he found where one of the blossoms had been broken from the plant. But that was all he found, and he had no way of knowing if it was P. B. Malone who had taken the flower or someone else.

Well, when it was daylight and the sheriff was back again they might find something else.

Because he was coming from Hansen's, he had to approach The Anchorage from the rear. Business had

picked up a little. Through the big screened windows he could see several couples dancing and the music of the juke organ came roaring out. A Duke Ellington recording of the *St. Louis Blues*.

If the kids who danced here had heard of the murder—and they probably had—they didn't let it interfere with their good time. *Why should they?* he thought. A few of them had met Marcia, but probably not one of the bunch who came out from the mainland had known Malone.

The thought of Marcia stirred that cold, uncertain fear inside him again. Suppose Alan Dwight had been lying about seeing her in the yard and the sheriff found it out? The sheriff was slow-going and awkward, but he was no fool. And he wouldn't stop trying until he had found the murderer....

Tom Harris cursed himself in silent fury. He told himself it was absurd to let the fear that Marcia might have killed her uncle keep creeping into his mind! It was totally impossible for a girl like Marcia to do such a thing! Mrs. Dwight was a hophead who didn't know what she was talking about! Besides—

He was about twenty feet from the back entrance to The Anchorage, an entrance generally unused except in the daytime by beer salesmen. Cocoanut palms threw waving shadows here—and he was almost on the woman before he saw her. He stopped dead still. Even the blood in his veins, the thought in his brain, seemed to stop, frozen, for long moments.

The woman was on hands and knees in the shadow beneath a palm. She was completely motionless. She was bent forward until her head rested on the ground between her forearms, which touched the sand from elbows to hands.

"Who—?" he whispered. He took a half step forward. "Miss Mary?"

She did not move. He bent cold, trembling knees to crouch beside her. It was Miss Mary Sawyer, the quiet, small, middle-aged woman who worked for him in The Anchorage. Her head was covered with dried blood which plastered her hair to the skull. Blood had dripped onto the sand between her forearms and caked there.

It seemed to Tom Harris that he could neither breathe nor control his own motions. He put out a stiff-fingered hand and touched her. She swayed, tilted, and rolled gruesomely over to lie on her back, and her blood-stained face stared sightless up at the sky.

HE had liked Miss Mary Sawyer. Since he had come to Lonesome Key, she had almost taken the place of his mother who had died years before when he was just a kid. Miss Mary was a small, kind, soft-voiced woman who had come to the island with a little money, people said, and when the money was gone she had stayed on, doing whatever she could: sewing, cooking, tending children for the winter visitors.

She had gone to work for Tom when he first opened The Anchorage. She'd had no enemies anywhere in the world, that Tom knew of. Certainly everybody here had liked her.

He lifted her gently. Her body was still warm and limp. He went in the back door of The Anchorage and down the dark hallway between the storeroom where the beer cases were kept and the shower rooms to the left. If he'd turned that way he would have come out behind the bar, but he turned to the right and pushed open the door which led into the little room where Miss Mary had slept.

There was a light in the room, a slashing sword blade of light that lashed at him as he entered, that stunned him so that he could see nothing beyond it.

Then the roar of the gun was like a world exploding and he felt the impact of the bullet dully and was reeling backward, falling for a long time through darkness lit only by the recurring flash of the gun.

Something struck the back of his head. The noises of the room changed to a dull roaring. He kept trying to get up. He was on hands and knees and he fell again, got to his knees again. He groped about through the darkness and his hands hit a chair and he tried to pull himself erect. He had been trying for a long time, for hours it seemed, when the light came on.

The room seemed filled with people, shouting, asking questions, running around and around. Then they were all gone and there was only Jane's anxious, pretty face over him, and by the door to the storeroom lay Miss Mary's body.

He sat weakly in the chair and tried to explain what had happened. "Whoever was in here must have—the first bullet must have hit Miss Mary. Then either the back of my head hit the door when I fell, or another bullet creased me."

He put a hand cautiously to his head, feeling the sore lump beneath his hair. But there was no blood. "I guess it was just the door."

He stood up, his knees watery so that he stumbled and Jane had to keep close to him, her hand on his arm.

"We've got to call the sheriff," he said. He put through a call; he told the people at the bar and in the dance hall they would have to go home.

They went out of the building all right, but they sat around in their automobiles without driving away, waiting for the sheriff, waiting for more excitement. This was something that struck home to them.

The other murder had been that of a tourist, a "snowbird" whom none of them knew; that was the sort of thing the Florida Chamber of Commerce got excited about, but not the local kids. But to kill Miss Mary Sawyer whom they had all known and liked, and to try to kill Tom Harris—that was different!

Inside The Anchorage, Tom and Jane Arthur were completely silent until Tom had spread a sheet over the ugly, pathetic, bloody corpse of the woman. When he stood erect again, his face was white but there was no fear in it. It was an older-looking face than it had been a few hours ago, almost gaunt with the gray eyes sunken and hard.

"Whoever did that," he said huskily, "isn't going to get away with it!"

"But why was it done?" Jane asked him. "Everybody loved Miss Mary. What possible reason could anybody have for killing her?"

"I don't know. Unless she accidentally saw something, the person who killed P. B. Malone maybe . . . "

He was thinking that her body had been still warm when he found it, though the blood on her head and on the ground between her arms had been coagulated.

He wasn't a doctor, but his guess would be that she had been dead between fifteen minutes and an hour. If so, then she had been killed while he and the sheriff were at the Malone house—and everyone who knew anything about Malone's murder was there also!

Everybody except Hansen! The thought struck him suddenly. And Hansen had a night-blooming cereus in his back yard!

He told these things to Jane, though he was speaking more to himself than to her, trying to find a solution.

"But why would Mr. Hansen have wanted to kill her?" Jane asked. "He's known her ever since she came here about ten years ago, but he never knew her well—just the way you know everybody on a little island like this."

"But the people around Mr. Malone didn't know her at all," Tom said. "I doubt if they had even seen her. None of them have been in here often, except Marcia. And anyway, Miss Mary stayed in the kitchen most of the time."

"The person who was here, who tried to shoot you—" The girl's voice caught. The muscles in her smooth,

sun-browned throat drew tight for a moment. "Why did they want to kill you, Tom?"

"I don't know. Unless it was because I surprised them here in the room and they just shot without caring who it was, just to get away without being recognized."

They looked at one another, the girl's dark eyes growing wide as the thought came clear. "Then the—the murderer must have been looking for something here, something that would tell who he was."

BOTH of them stared around the small, familiar room. It seemed impossible that in this sparsely furnished, neat little room there could be a motive for murder.

For more than two years, ever since Tom Harris bought The Anchorage and Jane and Miss Mary went to work for him, they had seen this room daily. It looked the same now as it always had. How could there be a reason for murder hidden here?

Then, at the same moment, they noticed that the top drawer of the little dresser stood open—and Miss Mary Sawyer would never have left it open.

They went to the dresser together as though pulled by a magnet. "It'll be something that ties up with the murder of Mr. Malone," Tom said in a half whisper. "He was killed first and Miss Mary must have seen it done, or seen something which would convict the guilty person, must have found and picked up something, and that was what the murderer was after."

The few cheap little handkerchiefs in the drawer were scattered about; the black leather purse gaped open and the small compact, the lipstick, the two pieces of chewing gum, the keys, and the dollar and twenty-three cents which it had held were sprinkled about the drawer.

"There's nothing here," Jane said. "The murderer must have found whatever he was looking for—if it was in this drawer." But she was already opening the drawer below.

Tom said, "There's a chance that she never had the thing he thought she did. He must have believed that she had found something and brought it back here. But maybe she never actually found it, or maybe she did, but didn't bring it here. And maybe he found it before I came in."

They went through the rest of the drawers: the clothes, the few intimate possessions of a middle-aged spinster who has already forgotten her youth, or who never had one.

And in the bottom drawer, in a back corner, they found the bundle of letters, and feeling rather embarrassed and indecent at this prying into the private past of a woman they had liked, they began to read them.

They were dated twelve years before, love letters from a man named Harry Adams. Harry had been a fluent and ardent writer, but on most occasions he had omitted to give an address and the envelopes bore postmarks of many cities.

Evidently he had called on Miss Mary, who was living on 132nd Street in New York at that time, as often as he could, but usually without giving her any previous notice.

Jane said softly, "I don't want to read any more of these. I don't see how they can prove anything—except that Miss Mary was young once and had a lover. They can't have any relation to the killing of Mr. Malone."

"I don't see how they can. Twelve years ago Mr. Malone was already married. And he was wealthy and living in Chicago. I know that from what I've heard Marcia say."

They retied the bundle and put it back in the drawer. As they were doing so, someone knocked heavily upon the locked door of The Anchorage.

V

IT WAS the sheriff. He was angry now and making no attempt to hide it. The murder of a wealthy tourist was a thing on which he would work

honestly and thoroughly and unemotionally. But the murder of a kindly old lady — *queer how everybody thought of Miss Mary as being old when she wasn't more than forty,* Tom thought—was a different matter.

The coroner had not come with the sheriff. He was a practicing doctor as well as county coroner and he'd been out on a case. The sheriff sent the body into town by a deputy.

"I'll just stay and wait for daylight," he said. "There's not much I can do this hour of the night. But, by damn, I'll have action here with sunup!"

He did. With the first level light of the sun he was behind The Anchorage examining the spot where Tom had found Miss Mary's body. But the kids who had been dancing inside The Anchorage and whom Tom had sent away had done too much looking around for themselves before the sheriff arrived, and it was impossible to tell anything now.

The sheriff said to Tom, "Now show me where this flower—the one like Malone had—was broken back of Mr. Hansen's. Maybe it means something, maybe it don't."

Tom showed him. But there was no sign of a struggle here, nothing but a smooth lawn of St. Augustine grass and the cabbage palms with the snake-like plants around them, the blooms drooping dead and hideous now.

Hansen came out, and in reply to the sheriff's question he said, "No-o," rubbing his chin in that slow, reflective way, "I didn't pick the one that's missing. Somebody else must have done it."

"Now you're really getting smart!" the sheriff snapped. He was still angry and getting angrier. "Just where were you last night when it was picked?"

"Why—I don't know when it was picked," Hansen said thoughtfully.

"Around eight o'clock, if it was the one Mr. Malone had," the sheriff told him.

"About eight o'clock?" He seemed to consider this for a while. "I was on my way back from Bradenton. When I got here I went straight to The Anchorage for a bottle of beer and a sandwich."

The sheriff started back for The Anchorage. The lot next to Hansen's house was vacant, overgrown with shrubs and wild fig trees. The sheriff was going down the sidewalk, halfway past this vacant lot, when he stopped. He bent slowly, then got down on his hands and knees.

"What is it?" Tom asked him. Hansen had gone back into his house.

The sheriff straightened so that Tom could see the thing on the sidewalk. It was a brownish red spot.

"Blood," the sheriff said. He stood up and began to go on toward The Anchorage again, cautiously now, a half step at a time.

At first the trail was fairly easy to follow, but when it moved out into the street it was more difficult, and when it reached the place where the kids had moiled round and round The Anchorage, it was lost altogether.

O'Dowle went back to the vacant lot again, Tom still at his heels. And here, back of one of the wild fig trees, he found a large splotch of dry blood.

"She must have been slugged here," the sheriff said. There was the beginning of a tight, bitter smile at his mouth corners.

"Then she must have broken away and run toward The Anchorage. That would be somewhere around midnight, if the way you figure her death was right. Maybe the killer chased her and caught up with her just before she reached the place. Maybe she just made it that far and then fell. Nobody saw her because this is a sort of back street anyway and the only cars around at that hour are the ones leaving your place to go back to the mainland."

He took out his pipe and lit it with a kind of slow satisfaction. "Maybe we are getting somewhere finally."

"What are you going to do now?"

"First, I'm going to see Mrs. Alan Dwight and find out how come she

mentioned Hansen's place having those night-blooming whatever-you-call-them flowers. And then I'm going to take Mr. Hansen into town and see if he can prove where he was at eight o'clock last night. Also I want to find out about this quarrel over real estate which Malone's niece told you her uncle had with Hansen. By that time, I'll probably have some other things I want to find out."

HE DROVE off toward Bradenton and Tom Harris went back to The Anchorage. No one was there, except Jane—there rarely were customers at this time of the day. She was cleaning up behind the bar when Tom entered, but she stopped to look at him, her small, heart-shaped face serious and worried.

"Well?"

"We found where she was—was hit," Tom said. "That vacant lot over this side of Hansen's."

"Do you have any idea who—?"

"I think O'Dowle is beginning to suspect Mr. Hansen, though there's no real proof yet. Hansen had quarreled with Mr. Malone. I heard Marcia say that. But what it was—"

"Your wealthy friend Marcia seems to know an awful lot about this," Jane said, and turned and began to scrub fiercely at the bar again.

Tom wished women wouldn't snap at you every time you mentioned another girl. Then, thinking about Marcia, the old feeling of fear, of uncertainty, began to come over him again. Suppose Alan Dwight hadn't seen Marcia a few seconds before the shots were fired? Suppose Mrs. Dwight knew this and told the sheriff?

If the sheriff kept her away from dope long enough, she would probably tell anything she knew—and maybe a lot she didn't. And she didn't like Marcia. She had told Tom that Marcia killed her uncle. She had been lying, of course, but . . .

Jane said angrily, "If you're going to keep smoking one cigaret after the other as fast as you can go, you might as well put them in an ash tray. I'm trying to clean up in here."

"I'm sorry. I hadn't realized."

Time dragged on, but it was still early when he saw the car stop outside and Marcia and Alan Dwight come down the walk toward The Anchorage. Jane saw them too and said immediately:

"I'm going to the store. We're short on hamburgers and several other things."

"All right," Tom said. He stood there, breathing in slow, deep gulps, watching the sun gleam on Marcia's golden hair.

She looked very fragile and slight and beautiful. It was wonderful how she kept her skin so milky white, he thought, although she had been here almost a month now.

They sat at a table with Tom. Except for the three of them, the big room with its scattered tables and its dance floor in the middle was empty. Beyond the screened windows the gulf stretched flat and blue and placid in the morning sunlight.

"We thought we'd come up and see what you can tell us about this thing," Alan Dwight said. "I hear there's been another murder. The sheriff came and asked Ellen to go to town with him, but he didn't want me to go along and he didn't want Marcia or Mrs. Malone either. He wouldn't give us any information."

Tom told them what he knew. When he told of the attack on himself the night before, Marcia said, "Darling!" and put her hand on his. But when he had finished, the first thing she asked was, "Does the sheriff know yet who killed P.B.? Does he think—?" She didn't finish, but the question was plain in her eyes:

Does he think I killed him?

"My guess is he sort of suspects Hansen."

A little of the strain went out of her face, replaced by a kind of hopeful look. "He asked me about the quarrel Mr. Hansen had with P. B. I wish I'd been able to tell him, but I just over-

heard a few words. I didn't know what it was about. But can't he—?"

"He'll find out from Hansen or someone," Tom said.

A BEER salesman came in and said he thought Tom needed six cases and Tom signed the receipt for four instead and repeated once more the story of what had happened last night. The salesman went away. Under the hot, early morning sunlight The Anchorage seemed asleep upon the empty beach.

"This murder of the old woman who worked here sort of confuses things," Alan Dwight said. "I figured it had to be somebody who could profit by

Tom Harris felt his hand tighten on the receiver. "Then maybe she was attacked before Mr. Malone," he said in an incredulous whisper.

"That's possible. But Doc Wyman won't swear either way."

"But if she was attacked before Mr. Malone, it couldn't be because of something she had seen! And what other reason could anybody have for killing Miss Mary?"

And he thought, *At least it clears Marcia. Certainly she could have no reason for killing Miss Mary.*

"I ain't certain of anything at this point," the sheriff said, and hung up.

Tom walked slowly back into the room where Marcia and Alan Dwight

Malone's death. Now . . . " He had taken the beer receipt book and the pencil and was drawing squares and circles and writing his name inside them as he thought. "Now I can't be sure. When was she killed?"

"About the time the sheriff was questioning all of us at Marcia's." Tom stood up. "I'll phone O'Dowle and see if he has anything new."

The sheriff told him, "I've talked with Dr. Wyman. He thinks it's likely Miss Mary was hit on the head quite a while before she died, maybe two hours or more. At least it's possible, he says. So maybe the killer left her for dead in that vacant lot and she recovered consciousness enough to walk almost to The Anchorage."

waited. His mind was a confused blur. Nothing about this crazy case made sense. There couldn't be any reason for killing Miss Mary except that she had seen something which made her dangerous.

He stood beside the table staring down at it with eyes blank with thought. Marcia said, "Tom—?" but he never heard her.

He was never sure when the realization came to him. It was a sensation rather than a knowledge: it was born in the pit of his stomach rather than his brain, and it spread in a slow cold wave to envelop his whole body.

He was staring down at the squares and circles Alan Dwight had drawn on the beer receipt blanks, at the name

written through them, at the flourish to the capital D and the way the final T was left uncrossed.

He heard his voice without knowing he was going to speak, a husky voice saying, "It's the same handwriting! You're Harry Adams! You're the man who wrote those twelve-year-old love letters to Miss Mary!"

For a long while it was deadly still in the big room. Tom could hear the faint murmur of the surf outside and the rattle of the palm fronds in the morning breeze. Then Alan Dwight pushed back his chair and stood up and there was a small automatic in his hand.

"So you know who I am," he said quite calmly. "I'm sorry. I started off with one murder eleven years ago, and Heaven knows how many I will have to wind up with. But I'm going to play it out as long as there's a chance."

Marcia's face was completely bloodless, horrible. Her eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. "Alan? What—?"

"You, too," he said. "Back into the storeroom, Tom. You go with him, Marcia."

Her breathing sounded louder than the surf now. It was a terrible choking sound. "What—? What—are you —going to do?"

"What can I do? My only chance is to get both of you out of the way and cook up some motive on one of you. On *you*, Marcia. It should be easy. Now get back to the storeroom."

Tom stood staring into the dark, emotionless face of the killer. Things were happening too fast. There was only a cold hollow inside his chest, a numbness in his brain. He couldn't fully understand this thing which he himself had started.

The girl was trying to get up from the table, but her legs would not hold her. She fell face forward over the table, sobbing. And Alan Dwight looked at her for a long moment before he said:

"All right. It'll have to be here. I don't have any time to waste."

He swung the gun slowly, steadily, to cover her.

And Tom Harris, in a last despairing effort, crouched to fling himself at the gunman.

It happened too swiftly for Tom ever to remember the sequence of events. Dwight swung back toward him, cursing, and in the same instant, or perhaps a split second before, Jane's voice was screaming from the door on the far side of the dance floor. She was rushing across the wide floor toward them, throwing the package she had carried.

The automatic banged, sharp but almost faint-sounding to Tom's cold nerves. The bullet plucked at his shirt side. Dwight had been turning before he shot, spinning to face Jane, the gun swinging to center on her, still twenty feet away, across the dance floor.

And now Tom dived, headlong, all his muscles exploding free of their icy bonds in the one movement. His shoulder smashed into Alan Dwight's side and they went down with a crash that shook the building. The sound of Dwight's head striking the floor was almost as loud as the sound of the second shot.

Tom got up slowly from the limp body. Marcia still sat in her chair, rigid, staring. Tom turned away from her. Then with a hoarse, anguished cry he went running toward where Jane lay on the dance floor.

Holding her in his arms he kept saying over and over, "Are you hurt? Where are you hurt? I'll call a doctor! Where—?"

She opened her eyes and after a moment she smiled at him. "I just slipped and fell," she said. She nestled a little tighter in his arms. "Maybe I should have tried that a long time ago."

TOM said, "He talked freely enough once they got him to the jail. He knew it wouldn't do any good to keep quiet, because his fingerprints

were on record and so they had him anyway. That's why, once I knew his real name, he had to get me out of the way. Because the least investigation and he was done for."

"What had he done?" Jane asked.

"A murder in New York eleven years ago. Miss Mary had known he committed it, and although she had been in love with him and he was supposed to be in love with her, he'd tried to kill her just to make sure she wouldn't testify against him.

"But she got away from him, and he got away from the cops. She came down here and never told anybody about her past. He went West and changed his name and got mixed up in one thing after another. He was smart and crooked. He married a woman with social position and money. He kept working his way up."

"And then he came here with Malone and she saw him?"

"Yes."

They were both of them back of the bar. It was late afternoon. The Anchorage was quiet and empty. "Because Miss Mary stayed in the kitchen most of the time, and because he didn't come here often anyway," Tom said, "Dwight had been on Lonesome Key for quite a while before Miss Mary saw him. He saw her at the same time. He talked her into meeting him on that vacant lot last night, though Heaven knows how he did it."

"Maybe she still loved him," Jane said.

"Maybe. Anyway she met him. And about the same time, Mrs. Dwight was walking with Mr. Malone and noticed the night-blooming cereus in Hansen's backyard. She was in a hurry to get on back to the house—for a little shot of dope maybe—but Malone decided to pick some of the flowers.

"You know how these snowbirds think that the personal property of the natives is something they have bought all rights to with their railroad tickets. So Malone wandered into Hansen's back yard to pick the flowers. And that's when he saw Alan Dwight slug Miss Mary. It scared him, naturally, and he yelled and Dwight set out after him, thinking he had already killed Miss Mary.

"He tried to catch Malone and bang him over the head because he didn't want the noise of shooting if he could help it, but it looked like Malone was going to get away. So Dwight shot him from the edge of the sea oats. He lost his chance at the money when he did it, but he preferred to lose the money and save his life."

"Then he came here to search her room for those old letters?"

"Yes. But what he was most afraid of was a picture he'd given her years ago. He thought she still had it. She must have lost it sometime in the past, but if we'd found it, it would have been a dead giveaway as to who he was. He came as soon as he could.

"That picture was all he thought he had to be afraid of, because he'd established an alibi by saying he saw Marcia in the Malone yard about the time of the shooting. He knew Marcia wouldn't give him away because she was afraid and needed the alibi herself."

The girl polished the already shining top of the ice cream cabinet. "I reckon Marcia thinks you are quite a hero now."

"I don't know. But I know that you saved my life. And I know I've been a damn fool, and I know I'm going to try hard to make you forget it. And—"

The look in her eyes told him she was willing to forget.

A customer entering a few minutes later stopped at the door, looking startled. "Hey! Hey, what kind of a place of business is this?" he asked.

Tom said, "Go on out and close the door. And hang a sign on it: *Closed for the Duration of a Honeymoon.*"

Up the scaffold steps walked an innocent man—eager to lighten the . . . .

Hangman's Duty

By Edward James

THERE was a hushed whisper from the reporters in the prison courtyard as the executioner appeared. As always, approaching the scaffold, his step seemed to falter. He was a tall bony man, with compassionate deep-set eyes that shrank even more deeply into their sockets when he had a job to perform.

Sheriff Tom Barton moved along at his side, and his own legs dragged like leaden weights. This was the hardest hanging either had ever attended, because they both knew the condemned man so well.

Sheriff Barton thought: "Public executioner was never a job for Ed Dayle. He never liked hangings. In a way it's good this is his last one. He's been wanting to retire for a long time."

As he put his foot on the first step of the scaffold, Ed Dayle turned and looked at the sheriff, and his lips pulled into a taut smile. But there was no answering smile in Barton's face which reflected the sharp pain that constricted his chest.

They both knew that the condemned man was innocent.

Sheriff Barton looked up at the crossbeam from which the noose was suspended. A breeze stirred the stout hempen rope and it swayed softly on its iron ring. Above it the sky was clear and blue and cloudless. A bird wheeled and winged its way across his vision. He almost felt envious.

How free it is! he thought. *How untroubled by the cares which beset us human beings!*

He put his foot on the third step and it seemed to freeze there. Ed Dayle placed a big hand on his arm and squeezed it.

"We got to do this," he whispered. "It's the right thing."

"The right thing?" Barton demanded and his voice held a note of bitterness. "To send an innocent man to his death?"

Dayle's eyes were steady upon the sheriff's. "This is just as hard for me, Tom, as it is for you. Remember that."

"If this were for a stranger—but such a close friend . . . " the sheriff said.

Dayle's eyelids dragged wearily down and he exhaled softly. Raggedness crept into his voice. "A man has a right to do what he wants with his own life. And when a friend begs you to do one last thing, how can a man refuse?"

"Because it's wrong—wrong," Barton breathed.

"Nothing's wrong," Dayle shook his head, "when it brings about the right result. And this hanging today will do that. We've got to go through with it. Remember, it's for a friend, Tom, a very close friend."

Barton's eyebrows made a black, frowning wedge across the bridge of his nose, and he gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. He gulped audibly and placed his foot upon the next step, lifting himself by a superhuman effort still closer to the newly hewn platform.

He'd thought about this thing,

thought about it incessantly night and day. His mind had been filled with it every waking hour. Had the condemned man been the slightest shade less persuasive, he would have backed down long ago.

Not that the murdered man hadn't got what he deserved. If ever a man needed killing it was Renny Kurtz.

And if ever a man had reason to do the job it was Clyde Ramsey.

Only the law wouldn't see it that way. Clyde Ramsey had killed Kurtz and by no stretch of the imagination could you say he'd done it in the heat of anger when he was not responsible for his actions. Clyde Ramsey knew what he was doing and according to his own lights he had done the right thing.

STEADILY mounting the gallows, Sheriff Tom Barton felt that under similar circumstances he might have done the same thing. He remembered when he'd first been called into the case. He had gone to Kurtz's home, the big frame house facing the village green, which Renny Kurtz had inherited from his father. Kurtz was lying on the floor with a .38 through his heart, and in death his face was wearing the same scornful sneering look it had held in life.

On the floor Barton had spied the small dark grease spots. He tested them and knew immediately they came from Clyde Ramsey's shoes. Clyde ran the filling station and garage near the edge of town. He knew Clyde had been there and done this thing because only the day before Clyde had said:

"Tom, I can't stand it any more. I'm going to kill Renny Kurtz. As long as he's alive, I can't sleep. Every time I look into Lucy's eyes and see the hurt in them, I think of Renny Kurtz in that big house of his, laughing at us with his mean mouth, and something cold grabs hold of me inside and starts twisting me to pieces."

The sheriff hadn't believed him. He hadn't believed there was really murder in Clyde Ramsey's big heart. Although if there had been, he felt it would have been justified.

He thought of Lucy Ramsey, sitting home now, pretty eyes red-rimmed with weeping, her face drawn and haggard, waiting for news of the execution, her hands clenched so tightly they'd be as white as scraped bone.

Sheriff Barton pulled out his great blue handkerchief and mopped the moisture from his brow. Poor Lucy. No matter what happened she was getting a raw deal. He remembered when she married Clyde. That was four years ago and they were still as much in love as when he'd been courting her.

Renny Kurtz had wanted her too, wanted her so badly he'd even proposed. He'd had more to offer, plenty more, so far as money was concerned. But Lucy had taken Clyde and that had hurt. Renny Kurtz had pride and she'd wounded it so badly he wanted revenge. He couldn't stand seeing them happy. He wanted to make them suffer.

And so he'd opened a garage near Clyde's and stuck in a manager and made him cut prices way below what anybody else could charge. But the townspeople and ranchers had kept right on going to Clyde Ramsey's place. They knew he'd do a good job and they liked him and respected him.

Clyde and Lucy'd had two kids, a girl the first year and a baby boy some months ago. A big lump welled up in Sheriff Barton's throat. He was remembering the little girl's funeral and Lucy standing over the tiny white coffin, her face blank and empty and deathly white. And Clyde standing there with his arm around her, neither of them crying, just holding it in. They weren't the kind to parade their grief.

It had been an accident. That's what Renny Kurtz had claimed when his big maroon roadster had come rocketing down the road past the

Ramsey cottage. Things might have been different if Kurtz had shown regret, or even sympathy. But he shrugged off the whole thing, said they hadn't ought to have let the kid play in the front yard so near the road.

There was evidence that he'd been drinking too, but nobody'd been able to prove that. And then the coroner, who was a relative, dismissed the whole thing as an unavoidable accident.

AND even then Clyde Ramsey might have let it drop, Barton felt, if Renny Kurtz hadn't driven his car up on the curb and badly hurt a couple of kids. This time he was clearly drunk. He'd been out on bail when the report had come through that he'd been shot through the heart.

Sheriff Barton reached the platform and he stood still for a moment, looking at Ed Dayle. Both men were grim-faced. Then Barton looked down at the reporters. They thought they had a story here, but if they only knew the truth, knew what had really happened . . .

He looked up and saw the condemned man walk unassisted under the loop of the noose. He tried to smile, but it only pulled his mouth out of shape.

Sheriff Barton remembered how he'd gone to Clyde's house that morning, reluctantly, his heart a dead weight in his chest. Clyde had been alone with Lucy's father. Barton told them what he'd discovered, about the grease spot and other things.

And then Lucy's father had gotten slowly to his feet. "You've got the wrong man, sheriff," he said. "It was me. I went to Renny Kurtz's house and put that bullet through his heart. I'm confessing, sheriff, and I'm ready to go with you right now."

Clyde Ramsey had jumped up, but before he could speak, the old man lifted his hand and cut him short. "Take care of her, Clyde. You're all she has left, you and the little boy. Be a good father to him. He needs a father, understand, Clyde."

And then, without another word, he'd yanked on the sheriff's arm and pulled him from the room.

Clyde hadn't taken it lying down. The sheriff knew what a good fight he'd put up with the old man, but Lucy's father was right. Lucy needed a husband, and her little boy needed a father.

And so today they were hanging an innocent man, and deep in his heart something kept telling the sheriff that it wasn't wrong. But still he was glad that Ed Dayle was there to practically take charge of things. Ed Dayle had been a widower for years and had been boarding with the Ramseys. He knew that this was the best way and he meant to see it through. His experience as county executioner was making him do what was necessary with an almost mechanical precision.

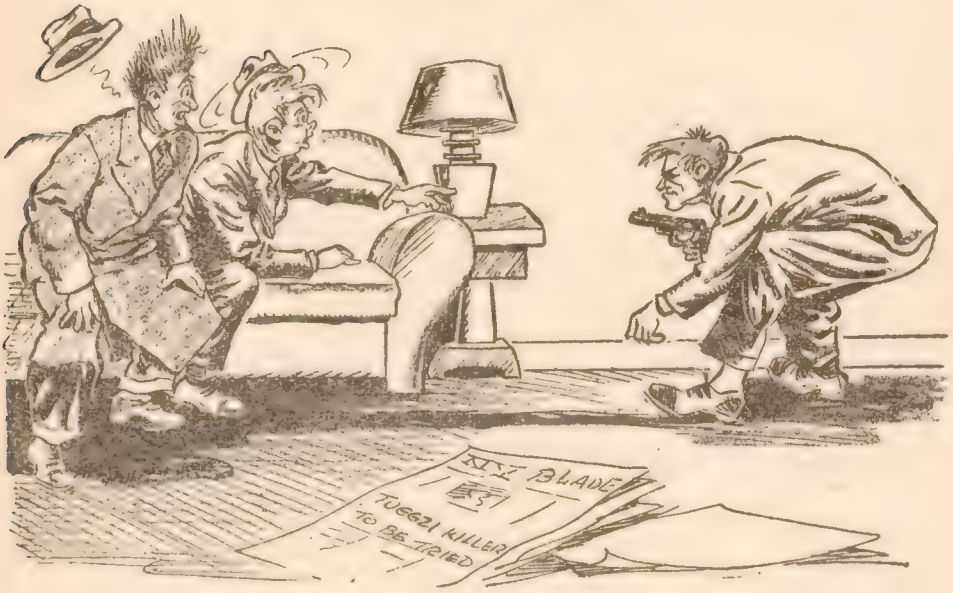
He took the black cloth of the hood in his hands, automatically went through the routine. He stood there, erect, waiting.

Sheriff Barton looked at his watch and wet his lips. Then he turned and nodded to the new executioner, and closed his eyes while the man pulled the iron trap lever.

He heard the trap swing open and the snap of the rope as it pulled taut. He knew that this was the least Ed Dayle could do for his daughter.

Tourist Scamps

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Snooty Piper and Scoop Binney, those two nitwit newshawks, come to New York for a vacation—and to do some research in rigor mortis.

EVEN me and Snooty Piper have to take a vacation. We ride down to New York on a Gray-whippet bus as we have not saved as much scratch as we had hoped for the junket to the big town. We get out of the cross-country jalopy on Forty-third Street and we are creaking all over like two haunted houses in a very high wind.

"Let's look for a hotel," I says.

"Let's find an osteopath," Snooty says. "My spine is now shaped like the handle of an auto jack."

We pick out a very modest lodging house on West Forty-fourth and check in.

"With so many citizens here," Snooty says as we take a gander out of our window, "there must be at least two good murders each day. I wonder if the managing editors down here have heard all about me."

"When do we go over to see Slats Riley on the *Blade?*" I ask.

"As soon as we tidy up," Snooty replies. "Everything is done quick here, Scoop."

We walk over to the East Side and enter a very tall building made in the shape of a tank trap. We take a lift to the seventh floor and enter the reception room. There is a swell trick sitting at a desk and Snooty tells her who we are. He flashes his fire badge and police card.

"Mr. Piper and Mr. Binney of the *Boston Evening Star.*"

"Where's that?" the doll tosses at us in quite a tired voice.

"Boston. It is the capitol of Massachusetts," Snooty huffs. "Or don't they teach history here in your schools? I wish to see Mr. Riley who works here even if I have to call the managing editor."

"Try it," the dame says. "He's in Chicago. Slats Riley? Wait, I'll see if I can find out which gin mill he's in."

"That is Slats all right," Snooty says.

SLATS comes out in about ten minutes and he looks like a fresh goon. He says as he lives and breathes, if it ain't good old Snooty. "How's the hay crop up your way, Cy?" he asks Snooty.

"Don't act like you was big town," Snooty sniffs. "Take us in and show us around the dump as there is scads of things me and Scoop want to do while in New York. Meet Slats, Scoop."

"There are things we cannot help doing at times," I says. We follow Slats into the city room of the *Blade* and Slats says we are from Boston and don't laugh.

"Piper, huh?" a guy says, pushing back an eyeshade. "The reporter who thinks he is Philo Chan? Have you told Dewey he is in town? There is a couple of old murders nobody has been able to do a thing with."

Everybody laughs.

"We ride almost three hundred miles to get insulted," I says. "Have you got more pals in this burg?" I ask nastily.

"That's a lousy makeup, that front page," Snooty says, picking up a copy of the *Blade*. "Where did you get most of your staff, huh? Look, Scoop. 'Man's Body Found in Bronx with Both Gas Jets Open.' Is that a head? Where is the boss? I will ask for nothing less than the city editor's job here, Scoop."

"Get those two hayshakers out of here!" a rough-looking person barks and we look around and see the character bearing down on us. He is built twice as heavy as Dogface Woolsey, our own boss and his pan is three times as forbidding as Dogface's. Slats says to meet the city editor.

"Riley!" the city ed says. "Is this a newspaper office or a Cook's Tour Agency? Keep your dizzy lookin' friends out of here and finish that follow-up on the Tuggzi rubout. Beat it, you two!"

"Why er," Snooty says, "I wish you would let us stay here for a while as Mr. Guppy of the *Evening Star* in Boston said for us to try and study modern methods while we were in New York. Mr. Guppy says the *Blade* is the paper he admires most and that the citizens who get it ready for bed must be tops. We could just sit and watch, couldn't we, Scoop?"

"Why, make yourself right to home, boys," the city editor says. "Why didn't you tell me who these guys were, Riley? Look, after you look around a while, come into my office, boys."

Snooty picks up a copy of the *Blade* and peruses it for a time. Then he says for us to go in to see the city editor and not to accept less than fifty per to start.

"I like it in Boston," I sniff.

"You are not progressive, Scoop," Snooty says.

We go in to see the city editor. Snooty says the Tuggzi bump-off makes quite interesting reading and that the New York gendarmes did not waste much time in apprehending the guilty citizen.

"No time at all," the C.E. says. "That gorilla from Boston should of stayed up there where he could murder citizens in safety. They think they are big time like the New York mugs, but find out different when they try their skulls against our homicide squad. Like you two guys, thinkin' you could improve on the *Blade*. No hicks can come down from the sticks and compete in this league."

"A character gets killed just as dead up there as down here," Snooty says

testily. "They are just as elusive, murderers, one place as another. So you are sure it was a Boston trigger man, huh?"

"Of course. We have a big Boston detective down here studying New York methods of criminology," the *Blade* editor says, lifting his nose. "He identified Kidney-Face Funzo the killer from Boston. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, the detective's name is."

SNOOTY wilts a trifle. "Would you mind opening a window?" he says. "I feel faint. So you fell for that big porpoise. Sendin' him down here is like pushin' a fat mongoose into a jungle to study tigers' habits. Did he work any on the Tuggzi rubout?"

"He did. Practically solved it himself," the city editor says.

"Tell us more," I urge.

"Well, this Tuggzi here in New York has quite a policy slip business, not that we are not trying to bust it up," the city editor says. "There is another character in Yorkville who also deals in the slips and it seems he figured Tuggzi was gettin' too big as he wanted to be the only big shot in the business. This guy is also arrested but is gettin' bail. His name is Manny Mace. Manny claims he didn't send for Funzo even if Funzo had a crumpled Eastern Union S.O.S. from him on his person when he was nabbed."

"They are quite sure the killer was Kidney-Face," Snooty says. "He must have left plenty of clues. Iron Jaw needs at least eight."

"Looks like Manny was tryin' to kid somebody, sendin' for an out-of-town torpedo," the editor says. "They do that sometimes, the big shots. Import a good man with a Betsy an'—"

"Why, I never heard of such a practice, did you, Scoop?" Snooty says. "The things New York crooks will do is a caution. We *are* learnin' things, ain't we, Scoop?"

"You kiddin' me, Piper?"

"Why, no," Snooty says. "How could you think that? Just tell us more as we can't wait."

"Funzo says he wasn't near Tuggzi's flat," the guy goes on, after lighting up another stogie. "But he leaves an old theatre ticket stub right on the floor near Tuggzi's remains. Come from the Gayety in Boston. A burlesque house."

"We wouldn't know," I says. "We don't go to such places up there. We only attend symphonies."

"Not only that. The guy at the switchboard where Tuggzi lived says Funzo called Tuggzi up sometime before the murder. He identified Funzo's voice at headquarters and told just what he said. More than that, they found the gat that knocked off Tuggzi in Funzo's room at a cheap hotel on Eighth Avenue."

"I don't see how your New York cops ever figured it out," Snooty says. "With no more than that to go on. Aren't they marvelous, Scoop?"

"They do the impossible," I says. "When will they fry Funzo?"

"Kidney-Face will go right after the trial," comes the reply. "Like I said, small-town guys shouldn't think they can come here an'—"

"We heard you say that already," Snooty says in a mean voice. "They was printin' newspapers in Massachusetts Bay Colony before you citizens down here give a quart of schnapps for Manhattan. I bet you couldn't give it back to the dopiest Indian. Come on, Scoop."

"Smart crackers, hah?" the city editor says. "Well, don't you dare show your faces in here again. Git out!"

We do. Snooty passes the info desk to leave a message for Slats and to ogle the carrot-topped gal there.

"It is lonesome here in New York," Snooty tells the squab. "How about showin' me the town, startin' at the aquarium?"

"They are tearin' that fishbowl down," the doll snaps. "So where will you live? In that green wrap you look

like a head of Romaine lettuce goin' on a hunt for an avocado. Ugh!"

"On second thought, you look like the grandma of the first Floradora sextette girl. I can do better in Childers' restaurants, Scoop," Snooty says.

"Beat it," the doll says irritably. "Before I pull your fresh tongue out so far you can use it for a shoe cloth. I'll also call the elevator starter, who is no Tom Thumb."

"Let's hurry out of here," I tell Snooty.

"Why? Is she scarin' you?"

"No, but *he* is," I says, pointing.

Snooty gets a look at the character in the gray monkey suit with brass buttons. The starter is so mean-looking he could make an army tank crumble with his stare.

"What's the trouble here?" he growls.

"The trouble is," I says quickly, "that I forgot to stay out of here. Which is an express going down?" We leave the building and find a tavern and order some beer.

"I miss the Greek's," I says.

"Let's leave in the A. M. and go up to the Catskills or somewhere," Snooty says. "Maybe there are characters there who do not think Boston is a backward town. I am quite sick of being patronized and ridiculed, being a citizen from the seat of culture itself, Scoop."

"I have seen better testimonials," I says blandly.

SNOOTY picks up a newspaper somebody has left on the table. He reads more about the policy slip liquidation and when he is finished, he reads it again. Pretty soon in comes Slats Riley and Slats asks how would we like to go downtown and places with him to see what makes criminals so jittery in New York.

"That is what I want. An inside on New York police headquarters, Slats," Snooty says. "Let's go right away. Maybe we can even get a look at Kidney-Face Funzo."

"I can git anywheres," Slats brags.

We go downtown. Just as we get out of the subway, a very familiar voice rings in our ears.

"Orson Welles wasn't k i d d i n'," Snooty says. "A man from Mars is down here and has just come down off the Pulaski Highway. Don't look now, Scoop, but it is Iron Jaw behind us."

We turn around. Iron Jaw sticks out a hand as big as a clown's foot. "Well, well, I heard you was comin', you two squirts, and I told Mr. Dewey and Dewey says that is fine as now I can take a vacation. Ha-a-ah!"

"You couldn't make me laugh if you took off my shoe and wiggled feathers against my bare feet, Iron Jaw," Snooty yelps. "Why are you wilting so much? Is there another murderer loose with his pockets filled with his fingerprints, his family photo album and the size of his shoes? Something is screwy, Iron Jaw. You couldn't ever find Braves Field when you was in Boston."

"Oh, yeah? I been out to the World's Fair," Iron Jaw says. "They must of told me wrong how to git there as I got off too soon. I walked an' walked an' finally found myself inside a big cemetery an'—"

We sit down on the subway steps and shake our noggins. "Iron Jaw," Snooty says. "They closed up the fair a year or more ago. I know where you can see Henry Hudson launch a new night boat to Albany. Have you gone up to Riverside Drive to talk to General Grant? And he apprehended Kidney-Face Funzo, Scoop!"

"I ain't kiddin'," Slats said. "He did a swell job on that."

"You're a New Yorker, huh?" Snooty sniffs. "Well, if you are sold on Iron Jaw, please come up to Boston soon, Slats. I will let you have the Charles River for a thousand down and a nine grand mortgage. Let's go downtown."

We are down in Center Street when Manny Mace gets bailed out and we have never seen a more indignant character. Manny is a very large citizen with a face that would scare an

armored division. Manny says somebody will sweat for picking him up and accusing him of hiring Funzo to rub out Tuggzi.

"I never sent no telegram to Funzo," Manny yips. "Somebody forged my name an' that is not honest. I never even heard of Funzo until I was nabbed. When I rub 'em out, I do it meself anyway. Oh, I'll make somebody sweat."

We are shown exhibits "A", "B" and "C", as Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has come in by this time and he wants to put on a show and rub it in. "A" is the crumpled telegram that they found in Kidney-Face's pocket. "B" is the Gayety theatre ticket stub, and "C" is the roscoe that has one bullet fired out of it.

"Got him cooked, hah?" Iron Jaw says. "A good thing a Boston detective was here to get the goods on a Boston crook, wa'n't it?"

"What was his name?" Snooty asks.

Iron Jaw gets very piqued. "Awright, I was tryin' to be decent. Now I won't have nothin' more to do with you two. I won't git you in no more places. I should have knowed this would be all the gratitude I would git. Go away from me."

He takes us to the hotel on the West Side where Tuggzi was turned into a cadaver. He introduces us to the character who identified Kidney-Face Funzo's voice. He is a witness for the D.A. and says his name is Ronald Reek.

"Yeah, I remembered his voice," Reek says. "He calls up Tuzzi and he says to the big shot, 'I'll be over as soon as I tuck a steak under my belt. A guy in Boston told me maybe you could use me.' Then I git a glimpse of his pan when he goes out after air-conditionin' Tuggzi. No wonder they call him what they do. Looks like somebody grabbed him by the chin and gave a quick jerk an' then forgot to straighten his face out ag'in."

Snooty looks pale and quite worn out. "What does Kidney-Face say about all this, huh?"

"The old stuff," Slats says. "He says he did git a wire from Manny Mace and thought he was comin' down here to git himself a job that was not havin' to do with fillin' graves. A guy meets him in Grand Central Station and says he is Mace's right-hand man and will take him in charge until Manny is not so busy with his enterprises. He admits calling on Tuggzi and having quite a chat with him.

"Two hours after he leaves Tuggzi's he is picked up for murder and taken back to look at a corpse. They find the gat in his room. Funzo told the cops what Manny Mace's right-hand man looks like but they laugh at him. He admits he was at the Gayety in Boston a few days before he came to the big town as he liked to see a gam show with the next citizen. He keeps sayin' he never knocked off Tuggzi. Everybody knows he did."

"Funzo went to Tuggzi's alone?" Snooty says.

"Yeah. He said the guy steered him to the hotel an' then said he'd see him in a certain place later. Funzo never saw this ginzo he talks about again. He said his name was Joe Smith."

"Oh my," Snooty says, "Poor Funzo. I guess we *are* hicks in Boston."

"What have you got that funny look on your pan for?" I ask Snooty. "Every time you git that look, you—"

"I wish the Greek's was here," Snooty iterates. "I could think better. Funzo shouldn't have been the kind of guy who keeps pawn tickets, burlecue stubs and things. Maybe when he knocked off Tuggzi, he took a hanky out of his pocket to mop his brow and the stub flew out. Aisle G, seat 5. I copied it down as you never know—"

A citizen comes out of the self-service lift and Slats Riley says, "How y' Al? Too bad about Tuggzi. Meet two newspaper guys from Boston. That's up North some place, ha."

THE spiffy character is Al Colima, Tuggzi's partner. Al looks like the front man for a bucket shop and right now he seems quite touchy and perturbed over everything.

"Been lookin' over Tuggzi's things," Al Colima says. "The rats. Sendin' out of town for a gorilla to knock him off. He'd know all the local torpedoes when he spotted 'em. I'll even things up. I find out Manny Mace is guilty an' they don't fry him, I'll fix him so he'll be ripe."

"Would you dare?" Snooty says.

"Shut up," I cut in. "Don't go inciting citizens to murder. Don't pay any attention to him, Mr. Colima."

"Ha, I get it," Al says. "Newspaper guys git their buns and java out of good murders. If I decide to puncture Mace, I'll call you guys first. See you later." He crams three sticks of gum into his mouth and saunters out.

"Lets go to our hotel, Scoop."

"I still don't like the look on your map," I says to Snooty. "Well, we'll be seein' you, Slats."

In the privacy of our room, Snooty says he wished he was at the Greek's in Boston.

"I could think this over much better there, Scoop," the crackpot says. Then he asks how much hay we have left and I make a rough estimate.

"Don't forget we pooled our assets," Snooty says and takes a slip of paper out of his pocket. He takes a close gander at it, then whisks it out of sight. I ask if it is the telephone number of a blonde in Childers.

"Could be," Snooty says and yawns. "I am hitting the hay early, Scoop."

"Huh? Nobody goes to bed in New York," I tells him. "I'm goin' out and look them over. You are slippin', Snooty Piper."

"I am just not flighty any more, is all," he says. "I can see neon signs and swell gams in Boston any night I wish. You go your way and I'll go mine. But you take no more than ten bucks out of the kitty with you, see!"

I go out, wondering what ails Snooty. It is like you dropped a cat into a mess of smelts and it laid right down and went to sleep in them. I finally ankle into Roseland and buy me a strip of gallop tickets and have quite a time with the dolls. It is two in the morning when I enter the hotel room. Snooty Piper is not there and I finally find a note he has left.

"Dear Scoop," the imbecile writes. "I will be back so do not worry. I am out of town on business and took all but three bucks. These N. Y. citizens do not know everything, do they? Forgetting what day it was Tuggzi was rubbed out. You know very well why they call Funzo what they do. Don't buy any lots in Central Park or get in no clip jernts. Snooty."

I sit up most of the night trying to dope out Snooty's letter but I get nowhere like a turtle walking through fresh tar. "The fathead!" I exclaim distractedly. "He thinks Funzo is innocent, I bet. He has not even laid his peepers on Funzo and was nowhere near the rubout when it occurred. I wonder if he is a gland case."

Snooty arrives in the big town twenty-four hours or so later. He asks where do I think he has been.

"Bellevue," I says. "That is New York's Danvers. Why did they let you out again?"

"I was in Boston," Snooty says. "Everybody at LaGrange Street is feeling fine, Scoop. I have been working on fingerprints up there. Of course the labs are not as spacious as down here and the experts there do not claim to be able to compete with experts here. I have pride in my fellow citizens, Scoop, and will not stand for wise N. Y. gorillas usin' Boston crooks for fall guys. It is dishonest."

"Who killed Tuggzi?" I ask quick.

"A person or persons unknown at the moment," Snooty says. "It was not Funzo."

I breathe deep. "Then Hess is still shootin' wild pigs in the woods near Munich," I toss out.

"Now you are bein' silly," Snooty sniffs at me.

"Look," I says to Snooty, "If you don't open up in just three seconds and talk sense I will—"

"In a few minutes, two citizens of Boston will arrive to pick me up,"

Snooty says. "They attended the Gayety with me in Boston, Scoop."

I PULL out three hanks of hair and toss them around the room. "The Gayety closed for a paint job just before we left," I yelled at Snooty. "Don't kid me any longer or—"

"Just the same, I went to the Gayety," Snooty insists. "Wait, somebody is at the door now."

"Come right in," Snooty says.

Two familiar characters ankle in. They are two slewfeet from Beantown and Iron Jaw trails them in and Snooty says for him to wait outside as he will not pay for an extra room.

"It's nutty," Iron Jaw howls. "Funzo was caught dead to rights. Every clue pointed to him like all magnet needles point north."

"Are we ready to apprehend the guilty character?" Snooty asks. "Well, let's go, then. I hope we won't gum it up with Iron Jaw around, ha. That is another clue, Scoop."

Two squad cars are outside when we hit the street. The New York gumshoers look quite subdued and I wonder at the way Snooty gloats over them. We hurry uptown to a very nifty-looking pueblo.

"You wait outside his door," Snooty says. "Me and Scoop will go in and act quite innocent about everything. I wish to ask Al a question. Don't forget to listen as well as you can."

"And don't leave your Betsys in your old suits neither," I gulps. "I have invaded characters' boudoirs with this silly before."

We are admitted to Al Colima's flat. The citizen is surprised to see us. Snooty tells him he called because he heard the nifty taxpayer could steer two lonely tourists to some swell numbers.

"Yeah? Oke, guys. There's two who warble in a night spot uptown," Al says. "I'll try to fix it."

"I hope they are as swell as the ones that we see in Boston," Snooty says as I shake. "Ever been to the Gayety there, Al?"

"No. I—say, why did you ask me that?" Al Colima's eyes get quite rusty and his fingers start moving and not toward his collar pin.

"To see if you would lie, you crook!" Snooty yelps. "You was in the Gayety up there two weeks ago and I can prove it. You planted that theatre stub near Tuggzi when you knocked him off, to hog all the policy slip racket, Al Colima alias Handsome Danny Deever. We are also arresting Ronald Reek as an accessory as he lied, too, and I can prove that."

"Oh, yeah? Smart guys, hah?" Al yelps. "How can you prove I went to that burlesque up in Boston?"

"You chew big cuds of gum, Al. I had to scrape fourteen chews off the bottom of Aisle G, seat 5," Snooty says. "Took 'em down to Boston police head—look out, Scoop!"

Al Colima gets his roscoe out and starts blazing. Snooty yells for the cops outside and one yells back and asks why didn't Snooty keep the door ajar as the lock is a Yale one.

"Well, what should I do?" Snooty says. "Wait until you send for the Harvards to break through it?"

"Oh, you do the darndest things," I choke out and dive under a divan.

A slug from Al's roscoe gives me a hotfoot and I can hear other things that are not bees making quite a mess out of the upholstery over my noggin. All the while, cops are banging at the door.

"Use your panzer," I howl. "Use O'Shaughnessy. If he will only just lean against it—hurry, somebody. Snooty, are you—"

"I am in the bathroom, Scoop. He can't touch me," Snooty says. "I have counted his bullets and he can only have one left. Make him miss you with that one and then I will come out and help you climb him. I—"

THE door breaks down and the cops come in and spread out over Al like a blanket. He still puts up quite a fight. He blacks one of Iron Jaw's eyes and bites half of the calf

off the big lug's left leg. After some time they put the State jewelry on Al and drag him out. We all go downtown.

Al Colima lets down his locks when he hears the evidence against him. Slats Riley and a big D.A. look at Snooty and shake their heads.

"His print was on that gum, the cops in Boston wired me," the D.A. mumbles. "It was him who went to the Gayety. He took the stub back here to New York with him and—"

"You tell us, Piper," a very large New York detective sergeant says. "Don't leave out nothin' as I just can't seem to believe it yet. How did you suspect Al?"

"I didn't at first," Snooty says. "It was the switchboard man at Tuggzi's hotel I was suspicious of. Reek. When I heard what he claimed Funzo said over the phone to Tuggzi, I couldn't believe it. That is, when I found out it was Saturday night the murder took place."

"I don't get it," the D.A. said.

"It was because New Yorkers do not know everything," Snooty sniffs. "They would not know that a citizen named Kidney-Face Funzo was not called that because his face was pulled out of shape. It was because Funzo liked his beans so well, especially on Saturday night when citizens in Boston eat most of their beans. Funzo like the red beans the best and we call them kidney beans in Boston.

"So when Funzo was supposed to have called up Tuggzi, he would never have said he would be over as soon as he tucked a steak away. Everybody in Boston knows Funzo would never eat a steak on Saturday night. He would eat beans even though your beans here are not fit to eat. Are they Scoop?"

"No," I admit. "But go on, Snooty."

"So I says to myself," Snooty goes on, "that may mean nothin' but it sounds screwy to me. Somebody was framing Kidney-Face Funzo. I got to thinking who would benefit by Tuggzi going across the Styx? Either Manny Mace or Al Colima, his partner. Al is very smart so he figures on removing Tuggzi, his pal, and to put Manny Mace on quite a spot at the same time.

"He goes to Boston and finds out about Funzo and has word dropped to Funzo that a guy like him could do okay down in New York. All he had to do was contact Manny Mace who was always scouting for the right boys. To Funzo's surprise—ask him—he gets a wire from Manny. It says he heard about Funzo and to come down and look him up."

"Yeah," Kidney-Face Funzo says as he comes out into the grill room. "That's the dope. Only it was somebody kiddin' me. A guy meets me, the one I told the cops about, and says Manny is all filled up but for me to go over and call to see Tuggzi. It was to put me on the murder spot. It was just my hard luck t' have that stub on me when I called on Tuggzi."

"You never did," Snooty says. "You was a patsy, Funzo, and isn't it a good thing some citizens from Boston were here to help you? These New York crooks should be ashamed framing a Boston crook, Funzo. Will you go straight now?"

"Yeah, Piper. I should not leave Boston and try to be big stuff, should I?"

"Al will tell us who the mug was that faked a connection with Manny Mace," Snooty says. "Or Reek will. This Joe Smith was handed the artillery by Al after the one man blitz and he stashed it in poor Kidney-Face's chamber at the scratch house while he was out. It was quite a plant and they sure wanted to make sure the citizen from Boston was hooked. Look at Funzo's vest. You wring it out good and you will find nineteen parts of bean juice and one part steak gravy. Huh, Funzo eating steak on Saturday night! A citizen named Finnigan would eat roast lamb on Friday quicker."

"You know I think I ain't got no brains sometimes, like you say, Piper," Iron Jaw groans. "I should of

tumbled to that myself. Aw, I'm goin' back to Boston an' try all over."

"Yeah. I don't think I would have ever got suspicious of things if Al had not cooked up that phone call to make his plot stronger," Snooty says. "And you shouldn't of ever chewed gum so, Al. Let's go to our hotel, Scoop."

Everybody calls at our hotel all the next day. Kidney-Face Funzo comes to thank Snooty again. Manny Mace comes and pumps our mitts and says for us to name anythin' in the way of a favor. Anything.

"If they'd convicted Funzo, I'd had a tough time crawlin' out," Manny says. "Just tell me a guy any place you don't like. Any place. I got ways of—"

Still another character calls and we let him in. It is no other than the city editor of the *Blade*.

"Why—er—say, Manny," Snooty says. "Anybody? Look, there is a guy who I could never miss. But promise me you won't mess him up too much and do it so he does not suffer."

"OH, HIM!" Manny Mace says. "I never did like that goon myself. The dirty things he says about me. Hello, Mr. Burnish. I've been talking to my pal here. He reminded me of a job I will do on you sometime when you ain't lookin'. Some day you will turn up missin' and who would ever search for the body of a city editor?"

"Ha, ha," the C.E. says, quite weak "They are kiddin' Manny, as I come to offer them each sixty bucks a week. I am firin' Slats Riley anyway an'—how about it boys? Three weeks vacation every year and—"

"We will come in tomorrow and let you know," Snooty says. "We are quite busy now, as you can see. I suppose you heard Mr. Dewey called us and said how much he liked what we done, huh? Good day, Mr. Burnish. We should not try and compete with citizens of New York, should we? We will ask Manny to change his mind about massacring you. Who did you say was on the phone, Scoop? Not La Guardia? Tell him to wait."

"I'll make that pay sixty-five," Burnish says as he ducks out.

"You do not intend to take that job, do you, Snooty Piper?" I snaps at him.

"Of course not," Snooty grins.

We walk into the office of the *Blade* at ten A.M. The redhead gets up and almost hugs Snooty.

"Can you ever forgive me for the way I acted yesterday, Mr. Piper?" the cute trick says. "I hope you will be at leisure tonight. I have the nicest girl friend for your pal and—"

"Gnats," Snooty says. "Tell Mr. Burnish we are waiting."

"Awright, you fish face," the doll says. "I still think you got out of the aquarium. Nerts, Mister."

We enter the city room of the big town rag quite impressively. There is

quite a silence in the place and Snooty breaks it when Mr. Burnish trots up to him.

"When will you start?" the C.E. says, rubbing his hands together like he is making bread crumbs.

"This noon," Snooty says. "We leave by bus for Boston. Me and Scoop Binney do not believe we should try and compete with such big shot reporting citizens as our talents are quite limited. Anyways we would not work for a tabloid that makes so many typographical errors. It is our reputation we must think of. Why, look at that stagger head there on this A.M.'s paper. 'Nazis Set Minsk Trap'. How do you spell 'minks' in New York? Come on, Scoop."

We leave by bus an hour later. We wonder why it lists to starboard until we see a large citizen with a derby taking up two seats. The driver finally turns around and yells at him.

"Listen, Mister. I don't care if you paid two fares. Sit in the aisle, will you, or git off the bus. Why didn't you have yourself crated an' sent by express anyways?"

Iron Jaw is very indignant. "Can't I find nothin' nowhere but insults? Can't I never have no peace, hah?"

Me and Snooty agree that we do not think he ever will.

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Detective Jim Tierney couldn't waste a minute when he tried to upset ....

Terror's Timetable

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

THE girl stood in Bert Dayler's doorway, her slim body turned sidewise against the rain that slanted out of the dark. She looked like any other girl—until the headlight beams struck her face and let you see the haunting loveliness that was shadowed by despair. Then your throat started hurting again. . . .

Jim Tierney set his teeth, braked the police car to a halt, and turned to his prisoner. "Well, here we are, Rick—"

Rick Prescott struck, then—struck with the suddenly unleashed fury of desperation, driving his fist against the dick's jaw. Tierney was jarred by the impact, rocked over against the door of the car.

He yelled, struck back—but the steering wheel got in his way.

Another blow nailed him, stunned him. In a red fog of pain he staggered out of the car. He saw Prescott dart to the girl, touch her for just an instant in a way that was a prayer, then dart into the narrow alley. The swift clang of shoes on a fire escape rang through the downpour.

Tierney let loose a bellow of pain and fury, and started after his man. He clawed at his hip for his police positive—which wasn't there, because Prescott had helped himself to it.

Then the girl was in front of him, tense and defiant as she blocked his path and stopped him with:

"Jim. *Jim!* I've got a gun in this handbag, and so help me if you don't let Rick go I'll—"

He looked down at her then. At the vibrant pleading of her eyes, and the droplets of rain on her red lips.

And Tierney—"Dapper Jim" Tierney, the toughest dick and the smoothest dresser in the department—wanted to put reverent fingers under her chin and tilt up her head and tell her once again that he loved her and that she was wasting her time on a punk like Prescott.

Which, of course, would get him nowhere fast. Like it had before.

And his prisoner was getting away. Tierney grabbed her handbag, and took out the pearl-handled toy she'd got somewhere.

He fired four shots up into the well of darkness and rain that concealed the fire escape. "Damn you, Prescott!" he roared. "Come back here! In the name of—"

The answer was the mocking bang of a window—Prescott had got into the building.

Tierney swung back to the girl. She had hold of his arm now, and she was tugging wildly.

"Joan," he said. "Look, honey—get out of here. There's nothing you can do, and I haven't got time to—"

"Sure!" She was sobbing now, half hysterically. "You want me to let you railroad Rick to prison. For something he didn't do—you *know* he didn't try to kill Dayler! Jim, I can't believe that you're doing this because of—because of me. You know I love Rick. Jim, if you ever loved me, *please*—"

The glow of Dayler's neon sign was upon her face. And Jim Tierney's left hand opened, closed very tight. And so he peered up toward the windows of Dayler's palatial living quarters on

the second and third floors. He saw furtive movement at one of the windows.

He said, harshly, "Joan, do one thing for me. Get into my car, quick. And stay there."

Her head came up, and she gave him one straight. strange look. Then she turned and obeyed.

The wry shadow of a smile hovered on his face as he went to Dayler's door and pounded on it with the pearl-handled toy. Joan had known that he'd bring Rick here—it was Tierney's favorite routine, to take a prisoner to the scene of his crime, watch his reactions. Old-fashioned, maybe, but nine times out of ten it gave you the lowdown.

So she had waited here, with a gun in her handbag. To try to help the guy she loved.

The neon sign read:

E. BERT DAYLER
Bail Bonds at All Hours

TIERNEY pounded again on the door, savagely. This place was just around the corner from the police station—convenient, no end. Some punk kid got into a traffic scrape, got a hundred-dollar bond hung on him, and got excited. He couldn't raise the cash—and if he didn't show up for work in the morning he'd lose his job. So he remembered Dayler's neon sign, and asked to use the phone.

The bond came through with astonishing ease. Glad to help out, son—no, you don't need to pay me a cent now—just a few bucks a week, eh? Here's a contract. . . .

The scared kid, thankful as hell, signed up. And it wasn't till later that he discovered that the contract provided for payments that he couldn't possibly make.

And Dayler smiling broadly, informed him that the contract was legal, airtight. Either he paid, or the bond would be pulled and back in the jug he'd go. He'd lose his job—and maybe have a suit for breach of contract to think about too.

That sort of thing throws a scare into a kid. So then Dayler would suggest a way out—a little job at a jewel importer's office. Perfectly safe—Dayler could guarantee that—and a little profit on the side, for the kid.

It was a way out. The kid made a modest haul. No trouble at all. Why in hell should there be, when Dayler owned the "jewel importer" setup himself?

But the kid didn't know that. All he found out was that he was into something, right up to his eyebrows. Because he went to work for Dayler in earnest, or else. Burglary is a real rap, son. Now you'll do just like I tell you, see? Or I'll turn you in . . . .

Dayler cashed in on theater holdups, jewel jobs, inside heists at the places where the kids worked. He had a nice thing here.

Sure, the department knew it. But you didn't do anything about it, not if you wanted to hold onto your job and your seniority and your health. Because Dayler had the right political connections, and plenty of 'em.

Rick Prescott was one of the stooges. And because he was a smart kid, he'd realized that he was getting deeper and deeper into a blind alley. And he wanted to marry Joan.

So he'd had a honey of a row with Dayler, right on the street.

Next night, somebody barged into Dayler's inner office and shot him in the back, and relieved his open safe of some four thousand bucks. The only fault Tierney could find with the job was that the assailant had been a poor shot—had punctured the bondsman's shoulder instead of his ticker.

And Dayler's new partner, one Trevor Niven, had arrived just in time to frighten the would-be killer, and to pick up the gun which the guy dropped as he fled.

Sure, the heater was Rick Prescott's. The one he'd bought some weeks before, at a pawnshop. Serial number and all—fingerprints too,

probably. Dayler, jolted unconscious by the slug, had not seen the assailant; but Niven had. Rick Prescott, of course. . . .

The harness boys, flocking over from the station in response to the sound of the shot, had swarmed through the building. All they'd found was an open trapdoor which testified to the kid's escape over the roofs.

And so Jim Tierney hammered on Dayler's door. This thing was a cinch. All you had to do was nail Prescott. With him tucked away for a long stretch, Joan would listen to you. . . .

Yeah!

THE door swung open, at last. And Niven was there— a slight, very blond, icily precise little guy.

"Where's Dayler?" Tierney demanded. "That Prescott kid just got away from me, got into the building."

Niven looked properly startled. "Why—Bert's in his room, of course. The doctor said he had to stay in bed until—Good heavens, man, we'd better get up there!"

Tierney followed him into the small, ornate private elevator.

Fat Bert Dayler had been a pretty elegant guy, sleek and suavely well dressed, fond of big diamonds and decorative women. But the night clubs and the gambling places would have to get along without him now. Fat Bert Dayler had the haft of a knife protruding from his chest; and his face was a flabby mask of death. The body still was warm.

Tierney straightened, squinted at Niven. "I hammered loud enough, on that door, to be heard halfway across town. But you were one hell of a while getting down there!"

"I was right here," Niven snapped coolly. "The doctor was afraid that that bullet might have tipped a lung—he didn't want Bert left alone for a moment. And the night nurse had a date. So I didn't leave him—until I began to wonder whether you were going to wreck that door completely. If I'd stayed here, I might have been able to prevent this!"

Tierney kept his eyes narrowed, glanced at his strap watch.

"You came right down, eh? That ought to establish the time for us. One forty, now . . . ."

Niven checked that with his own watch, and nodded. "I happened to notice that it was one thirty-four, when I went down."

"He was okay then, eh?"

"Of course!" Niven's sharp, smooth face held a chill sort of anger. "But what does this get us? You let that damned killer, that crazy Prescott kid, get away from you. Then you called me downstairs. He sneaked in here, finished the job that he muffed the other night. Fella, you'd better be getting him!"

Tierney sighed, nodded, and picked up the bedside phone. He dialed the station, got the night sarge at the desk.

"Nilsson? Tierney . . . Yeah . . . One twenty-one, eh? . . . Thanks."

Very gently, then, he put the instrument into its cradle and swung to face Trevor Niven.

"That was bad news," he stated. "For you, mister. Because you saw that Dayler had a good thing here, and you decided to cash in on it all by your sweet little self. Prescott's row with Dayler gave you the opening you needed. You swiped Prescott's roscoe, shot Dayler. You did a bum job of it, but before you could find that out and do anything about it, the boys from the station swarmed in here.

"You did a better job just now, with the sticker."

Niven's thin face twitched. "You'd better lay off the snow, fella. You can't prove a wild shot-in-the-dark like that."

"I don't have to. You said Dayler was okay when you left him, at one thirty-four. And the kid, Prescott, checked in at the station at one twenty-one—he skedaddled over the roofs, like I told him to. We gave you

what looked like a break, a chance to finish the thing up, and you went for it. There's nobody else in this building—so that puts you on the road to the chair, mister."

Niven's eyes were pin-points of ice. He whipped out a small automatic pistol, fired.

But not quickly enough. Dapper Jim Tierney's shot, from the pearl-handled toy, had nailed the precise little guy dead-center. It was the spasmodic twitch of death that triggered the little automatic. The slug went wild.

Tierney shook his head in mild regret, strode to the windows and peered down into the street.

He saw Joan, alarmed by the sound of the shots, come scrambling out of the car. The glow of the neon sign glinted briefly upon slim, chiffon-clad legs, and upon the white, lovely face that she tilted up against the rain.

She had sensed, somehow, that Tierney was trying to help Rick. She'd trusted him—she'd stayed in the car. Now he had to tell her that everything was okay, that she could go to the station and take the young punk out of hock.

Tierney glanced down at the body of the man he'd just killed. You had to do things like that, when you were a cop. You had to be a shade tougher than the next guy. A shade more ruthless, maybe. And Joan deserved something better than that.

So he shrugged, and felt of his chin, and grinned. Hell, Rick hadn't needed to sock him quite *that* hard, to make the escape look good. The kid packed a wallop—he was okay.

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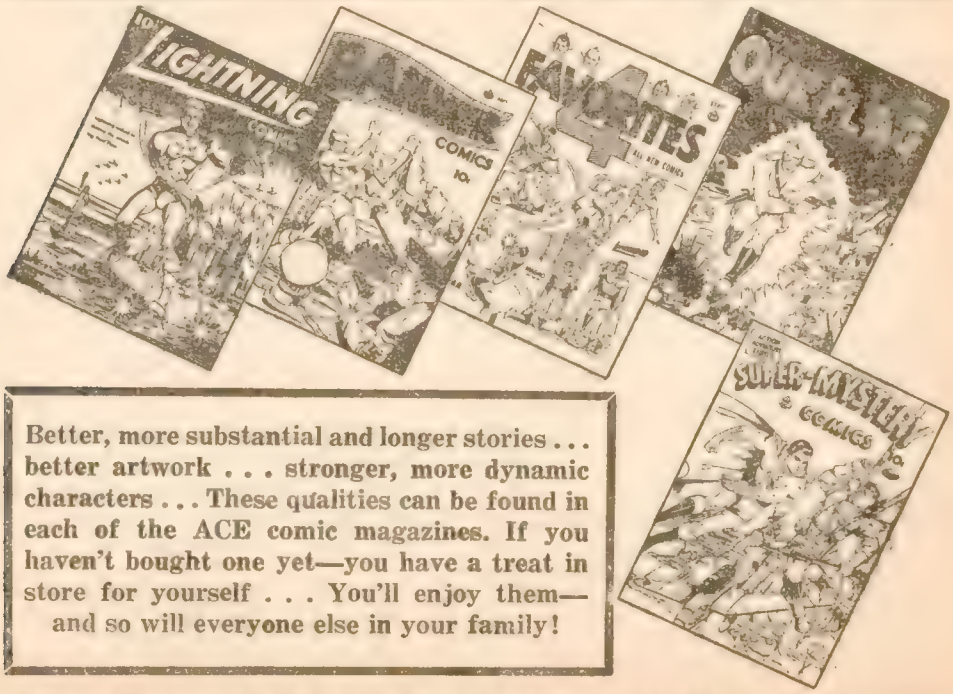

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Enigma of the Shrunken Head

By

James A. Kirch

When Detective Harkness got mixed up with murder in the artists' colony, he should have brushed up on his homicide handiwork. For he was about to become a death master's model—a model without a head.

I STOOD with my back pressed flat against the door for a full two minutes before I walked to the rear of the cottage and pulled down the shades. I flattened alongside the door to the bathroom and pushed it open with my foot. I tried the closet the same way. I went back and slid the bolt in place and then walked over and looked at the bed.

It was Clark Reilly, all right. He was wearing the rubber-soled shoes he'd borrowed from me when he packed to come to Woodmont. His grey tweed suit was wrinkled and torn, as if he might have tried to put up a fight before the end, but his hands hung loose and empty over the edges of the bed. He hadn't had anything to fight with.

I stayed there that way for a long time, just staring down at the bed, and then I leaned over and pressed my hand cautiously against the bedspread, a few inches from Clark's neck, where his head should have been. I couldn't believe it wasn't still there.

When my nerves had stopped jumping, I crossed the room to the telephone, calling the sheriff. I didn't look at the bed again until Sheriff Gaylord arrived.

Gaylord was a bouncing little man, with a broad smile. He lost the smile as soon as he looked at the bed. His fat little lips shot out, and his words came in a half whisper: *"Gawd-a-mighty!"*

Behind him, like a coal barge, towed by a tug, came a big chunk of a man, with a flat, broad face and the shoulders of an ox. He reminded me of Charles Laughton, playing Rembrandt, but he was at least two inches taller than Laughton. He wore a light pink shirt, with an emerald green tie, and he had a narrow brim fedora, cut like mine, but gray, angled at the back of his big head. If I was right, he was Ernst Tallermand, which made him our client.

The sheriff pulled the bedspread down over the body, the cloth falling slack where the head should have made a bulge.

"All right," he said. "You say this was Clark Reilly, the insurance company detective, checking on Mr. Tallermand's paintings. What's the rest of it?"

I looked at Tallermand, but he just stood there, staring at the bed, his eyes wide.

"Ajax carried thirty thousand on the paintings Tallermand planned to exhibit. We'd insured them every year, for five years. When he reported the theft, we sent Reilly up to investigate."

"We?"

"I'm Ken Harkness," I explained. "District manager for Ajax. Clark wired me last night, asking me to come out." I gave the telegram to Gaylord.

He read it slowly, as if looking for a clue. He was wasting his time. "Don't say much," he offered.

Tallermand opened his mouth, sucking the air in like a fish gasping. "Horrible," he said, hoarsely. "This is horrible."

"It's crazy," I told him. "And that should make it a cinch. Nine times out of ten, a butcher killer, especially one who takes the head away, is a homicidal maniac. Before we're through, he'll probably convict himself. He should be easy to trace."

Gaylord grunted. "We've got close to two hundred painters, writers and just plain screwballs up here. It won't be easy, Harkness."

It didn't have to be easy. I'd carry that picture of Clark's body in my mind until I found the butcher who carved it, and I didn't like the picture. I told Gaylord that.

"Who're the chief ones?" I asked him. "Who would you put first on your list, looking for a man who'd use a knife like that?"

THE sheriff's eyes widened, then narrowed suddenly, as if he'd just thought of something. He looked at Tallermand, and the artist stared at him with his jaw hanging loose at the hinge. Neither of them spoke.

"Well?" I asked, finally.

Gaylord shook himself out of it. "There's a Professor Mallock, who's a student of magic and that stuff. He's got a place down in the hollow."

"Magic?" I said. "Listen, sheriff, it didn't take magic to kill Reilly. It took a knife."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "That ain't all," he said quietly. "He's done some exploring, too. From what I hear, he spent a while in Ecuador, living with a tribe of Indians. *Head-hunting Indians.*"

He hesitated a minute, turning to stare at the bed, and when he went on his voice was unsteady, as if he hardly believed it himself. "He's got one of them working for him, now. Calls him Jivo."

I stood there for a full minute, letting it sink in, and then I slid my green fedora off the table and started for the door. I nodded to Tallermand, but I didn't say anything, and I didn't wait for the sheriff. As I closed the door behind me, I got a glimpse of the two of them standing there staring at the bed, not moving.

Woodmont is a rambling town, sprawled in the cradle of the Ramapos. The swank section lies in a valley dotted with queer, stage-setting houses, some of them with glass studio sides. The third one down the path, was Professor Mallock's.

I turned down the path and climbed the three steps to the porch, reaching for the knocker. I didn't quite touch it. I held my hand above it, like a cat who's been set to swat a hornet and heard it buzz. This wasn't a regular knocker.

It was an ebony death mask, with streaks of red, green and white splashed crazily over the face. The lips were twisted back, as if daring you to come in. I drew my hand back and wrapped on the panels with my fist. When it finally opened, I got my first sight of Jivo.

His face was flat, with a wide, flat nose and a low forehead, with long black hair pushed carefully away from it. He wore blue slacks and a white linen coat, but he didn't look any more right in them than Gargantua would have. Even though I was taller, he seemed to tower over me.

"Professor Mallock," I said. "I'd like to see the professor."

Jivo had been well-trained. He nodded like a Jap valet, stepping back to let me in, motioning to a door at the side. Keeping my eyes on him, I slid through the doorway, facing him until he turned and started for the rear of the house. Then I swung around and studied the room.

It didn't look like a collector's house. The place was modern, even to a French telephone in the corner. I tried to fit it to what I'd heard of the professor, and then I noticed the open door at the rear, with a white mask hanging over it. I wandered over casually and stepped inside.

This was the works—the trophy room. To the right, crossed like swords on the wall, were two eight-foot tubes, with a little card tacked under them: *Jivaro Indian Blow-guns.*

Everything was labeled that way. The short-handled hatchet had a card saying *Jivaro-Machete,* — and the dozen spears dangling on the walls were classed as *hunting, fishing,* or whatever type they happened to be. Opposite them, on the left of the room, a mounted leopard crouched as if to spring. It looked as if the Professor got around.

AT THE far end, near a back door, stood a small glass case, with some sort of special exhibit inside. I walked down to it, giving the stuffed leopard a wide berth. When I reached it, I forgot about the leopard. It was special, all right.

There were four little things inside, about the size of my fist. Three of them had long black hair that trailed almost to the floor. The skins were a dirty, tar black and their lips had been punctured with a piece of black string that dangled like a guide rope, but their features were still almost perfect. I'd seen Jivo, and I didn't need the label to tell me what they were. *Shrunken heads of Jivaro Indians.*

The fourth head was different. It

was as black as the rest, and it was shrunk to the same size, but it didn't have the long hair, and it didn't have the flat, broad features. The proportions were still right, with a long high forehead, a thin straight nose and a generous mouth. It was a white man, all right—it was Clark Reilly!

I just stood there, staring at it. The glass case started spinning before my eyes, the four little black heads whirling like marbles. Three flat Indian faces, and the quiet, calm face of a white man. I put my hands out to steady the case, and then I realized it was my brain that was spinning and not the shrunken little balls. I braced both hands against the top of the glass and I stayed that way until things stopped swimming and the four little heads fell into place, like roulette balls in a slot.

It was still Clark Reilly.

I got away from it, somehow. My hands shook like damp leaves and my spine crawled from one side of my back to the other, but I got back to the living room to the phone, and I managed to get the sheriff.

And then I couldn't say it. I could mumble a string of meaningless phrases at him, but I couldn't make myself say that the shriveled head of my best friend was in a case like a stuffed rat. I told him where I was, and then I cradled the phone and stood there, staring at the wall, trying to drive the picture from my brain. I don't know how long I'd have stayed that way if it hadn't been for the voice behind me.

It was a quiet, calm voice, with a touch of steel behind it. "You will raise your hands."

I started around, fast. I didn't do much more than start. When I'd made a quarter turn, I saw the gun and stopped turning. My hands went up, waist high, and then I started turning again, very slowly, so he wouldn't get the wrong idea. I forced my eyes away from the gun, studying the man.

He was a little fellow, about five foot six, with a long, pointed head, and a Van Dyke beard to balance the head. Except for the sharpness of his features, he might have been a butterfly-chasing professor, the kind you see in the movies. But you don't chase butterflies with thirty-eights.

I said, slowly: "Professor Mallock?"

The pointed head dipped a fraction, but he didn't answer. He took a step forward into the room, swinging a little to the side. His right hand, the gun hand, motioned to me. I went into the trophy room ahead of him, walking slowly, keeping my hands waist high.

Mallock said, quietly, "To the left," and I backed across the room, stopping near the crouched leopard. He circled the room, checking his treasures, keeping one eye on me and the gun pointed my way.

When he reached the glass case, he slid open the back and straightened the heads inside. He looked up at me, his little eyes bright.

"Nothing is missing." He said it as if he'd really expected something to be missing. He had poise, plus.

I took a step toward him, keeping my hands raised, getting in line with the case. That's all I took, that one step. The professor was wrong. Something *was* missing.

There were only *three* heads, now. Three shriveled little Indian heads. The fourth one was gone.

Mallock lowered the gun a little. "I may have been hasty," he said. "Things were disarranged, but I may have misjudged you." His eyes were guarded, half veiled, as if he were wondering how I'd take it.

I took it his way. I didn't know who was misjudging whom, but I was willing to string along. As long as he held the gun, it was his show.

I said: "I may have jarred the case, professor. Those things unnerved me." I lowered my hands, fishing my agency card from my wallet.

He took it and stepped behind the

case, out of reach. His eyes dropped to the card, then came back to mine. "Insurance," he said, slowly. "About Tallermand's paintings, I suppose. I know nothing."

I didn't call him a liar. He still had the gun and he looked as if he knew what guns were made for. I said: "Those four heads, professor. How do you make them?"

I don't know whether he heard the *four* or not. If he did, he let it pass. He looked towards the door and said softly: "Jivo."

I DIDN'T turn. I heard the Indian's soft feet padding toward me, but I stayed as I was, watching the professor and the gun. A hard hand closed on my left shoulder and something touched my neck, behind the right ear, but I didn't let myself turn, the way I wanted to.

The Indian's voice half hissed: "It is simple. You cut the head, so, leaving part of the neck." His hand sliced across the back of my neck like ice. "You slit from here"—his fingers jabbed the top of my scalp—"down to here," and his hand traced the rest of the line.

I had to dig my nails into the palms of my hands to keep from swinging around. The professor's lips twisted to a tight little smile. He was enjoying it.

So was Jivo enjoying it. His fingers clenched in my hair, tugging a little, as if taking something out. "Through the hole, you remove the bones, leaving the skin and the soft parts." He pulled, tightening the skin on my scalp, and I wanted to shake my head, to make sure it was still all there. But Jivo hadn't finished.

"The head is dipped in the juice of the huito fruit, which stains it black, and it is ready for treatment."

"Treatment?" That was the first word I'd managed.

He released my hair, stepping back. "You fill the cavity with hot stones and turn the head steadily, so the stones hit all the inner parts. This keeps up until the head shrinks to the right size. Sometimes it takes days, or weeks, and the head is passed from hand to hand. That is all."

"That's enough," I told him.

I edged away, toward the professor, and Mallock dropped his gun in his pocket. He reached into the case, removing one of the horrible little heads, fondling it like jewelry.

"Perfect, isn't it?"

I didn't tell him what I thought it was. I'd had enough of the professor and his head hunter. I wanted out, and out fast.

"When the sheriff comes," I said, "tell him I had to rush down to Tallermand's. If you could direct me there . . ." I left it unfinished, not quite sure how he'd take it. I had a fair hunch he was willing for me to leave, if I left quietly, but I wasn't sure.

My hunch was right. He moved to the rear door, throwing it open. "His place is down the lane, toward the end of the valley. You can't miss it—the roof is half glass." His bright little eyes met mine, and the veil dropped from them. The little guy was laughing at me—laughing inside, like a screwball laughs. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you," he lied.

I didn't tell him he had helped me. I said I was sorry to have bothered him and hoped I hadn't hurt his exhibit. I slipped out the door onto the vine-covered terrace and made my way through the trees around to the front of the house.

When I reached the path, I turned back, staring at the building. There was a thin line of ice along my neck, where Jivo's hand had sliced, and my head had a half empty feeling. I wondered if I'd seen a fourth head, or just imagined I'd seen it, and even though I *knew* I'd seen it, I kept wondering.

I had an idea that was what people meant by hypnosis.

Mallock had been right about Tallermand's house. The north side of the roof was a solid sheet of glass, slant-

ing upward like a single-pane greenhouse. This one had a putty-knife hooked to the door as a knocker. These guys just couldn't be normal.

The man who answered my knock was dressed in dirty white slacks with a crew-neck sweater pulled turtle-fashion around his throat. He was small, but there was something familiar about him. He was a pocket edition of Tallermand.

I said: "I'm looking for Mr. Tallermand."

His face lighted up like a kid's. "Me," he said, quickly. "Me." There was something wrong with his voice.

I shook my head and his eyes popped open. His voice wasn't the only thing wrong. His eyes were too bright and he had a peculiar way of sucking in his lower lip and holding it between his teeth. The guy was screwy.

He said, "Oh," in a hurt tone, and stepped away from me, leaving the door open and padding toward the room at the north. I tossed my green fedora on the hat rack and followed him, wondering where my client was.

He wasn't in the studio. The little fellow had an easel set up, with a palette resting on a stand in front of it. There was a painting, or what was supposed to be a painting, in the easel.

I think the guy stood ten feet away and threw paint at the board. He had a crazy jumble of half pictures, half blurs, done in a weird galaxy of colors, and while I watched him, he smeared a streak of vermillion through the center. I never saw anything like it. He stood there, grinning happily, waiting for my okay.

"Nice," I said, cheerfully. "Something nice, that."

HIS head bobbed up and down three times, as if he counted the nods. He picked a paint brush off the palette and smeared a streak of lightning through the middle of a lake, still smiling happily to himself. He seemed to forget I was there.

I wandered around the studio, studying the paintings on the wall. This Tallermand, in spite of his screwy shirts and phony Rembrandt manners, really had something on the ball. I was still examining them, wondering why the hell the pains in the neck had all the talent, when I heard a screech from the little guy.

He was standing in front of his easel, a dull paint knife in his hand. While I watched him, he brought the knife forward savagely, slicing it across the horrible mess he'd created, shredding it like tissue. When he'd finished, he turned towards me, his little eyes bright.

"Easy," I said. "Take it easy, buddy."

He wasn't taking it easy. He still held the blunt knife in his hand and his lower lip began pushing in and out, in and out, as if it were on springs. He started my way, coming forward in little half circles, his lip still working.

"Ruined," he said, shrilly. "My work is ruined!" He made a circle to the left that brought him within range, and I got set. He was going to do some more ruining. That is, if I let him, he was. I didn't figure on letting him.

The voice from the doorway said: "Richard." Quietly, like that, the way you call a well-trained dog.

The little fellow froze in midstride. He swung around, the glow fading from his eyes. Tallermand said again, "Richard," and the little fellow dropped the knife to the floor and trotted over to him.

The artist was poised model-fashion against the doorway. He said evenly, "You'd better go upstairs," and the little fellow went past him without even a backward glance. Tallermand came forward, his thick face creasing to a frown.

"My cousin Richard," he explained. "He's been ill for years." He hesitated a moment, then went on. "He used to dabble a bit with paints, but lately . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"You mean he's getting worse?" I said it very carefully, but Tallermand got it. He stretched out his hand catching my arm.

"He's harmless," he said, quickly. "I won't have you persecuting him."

I hadn't known I'd been doing the persecuting, but I didn't tell him that. I said: "Everybody's harmless, at times. But maybe not all the time."

His fingers bit into my arm. I'd started him thinking, and he didn't seem to like what he was thinking. His voice took on a harsh note.

"You're working for me, Harkness. They were my paintings. I don't want you bothering Richard."

He was dead wrong there. I *wasn't* working for him. I wasn't even working for Ajax. I was working for a guy who couldn't help himself any more—Clark Reilly.

I told him that, and I wasn't pleasant in the telling. "Reilly was my best friend. When I square this murder, we'll talk about your paintings—but not before." I shook his hand off my arm.

"H a r k n e s s," he said. "Listen. Harkness . . ." And then his eyes met mine and he shrugged and brought his jaw together with a snap. He turned his back on me, heading toward the door, readying to ease me out.

I was willing to be eased. I'd seen enough of Tallermand and his screwy cousin to suit me. For that matter, I'd seen enough of Woodmont.

Tallermand was a few steps ahead of me when we reached the door and he stuck his right hand out like a feeler, snaking a hat off the rack. I said, "Thanks," reaching for it, before I realized it was the wrong hat.

It was his own grey one. He was even more upset than I'd thought. He just stood there, staring at me, not taking it back, as if he expected me to slide the hat on my head and leave. I made the switch myself and nodded to him, opening the door to step outside.

SHERIFF GAYLORD was at the edge of the porch, climbing the first step, Professor Mallock tagging at his heels. Gaylord's face was beaded with sweat, as if he'd raced down the path to catch me. He had a small white parcel in his hand.

"Found this at Mallock's, in his trophy room," he explained. "Your name's on it. We figured it might be important."

It was wrapped in dirty white paper, with my name printed in pencil, in childish letters. It was about the size of a pint container.

They were crowded around, pressing me, like kids watching a Christmas box being opened. They stayed that way, pushing eagerly, until I ripped off the paper. Then they moved back fast.

I just stood there, staring at the thing in my hands.

I wanted to laugh, but I didn't laugh. There was a clammy feeling at the pit of my stomach that would have washed out the laugh. I'd heard about these things before. They said witch doctors used them as warnings.

It was a little figure, about four inches long, made from cheap clay. It didn't look like anyone special, just a lump of clay molded to the shape of a man. It could have been Sheriff Gaylord, as well as me, except for one thing. The package had my name on it—Ken Harkness. So it wasn't Sheriff Gaylord. It was me.

It was wrong, though. The way I'd heard it, there was always a tip-off, a clue to the method of death. With this one, there was no sign. At least, I thought there was no sign. I thought wrong.

I held it up, balancing it on my hand and I found the clue. The head toppled back crazily, dangling from the shoulders like a hood. That was the tip-off.

The throat had been cut half-way through.

Sheriff Gaylord said, "Gawd-a-

(Continued on page 107)

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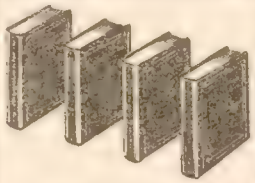

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(Continued from page 105)

mighty," but none of the rest of us said anything.

We just stood there, staring down at the headless figure, not moving. Gaylord bent his head a little, leaning over the package, and stretched his right hand out to touch it.

The figure jerked from my hand, dropping to the porch floor, the head bouncing off and sliding across the wood. Gaylord reached for it, but I beat him to it. I took a step forward, tramping it, and turned my foot with my full weight pressed down. When I stepped back, it was a mass of squashed clay.

I waited until I was sure I had them before I spoke. I wanted this to be definite, so they'd all get it. I said it loud enough so it would carry through the house.

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I waited a second, letting it sink in, then finished slowly. "That's the best part of it. This guy will give himself away before we're through. All I have to do is stick around."

I slapped my green fedora on my head and walked down the steps, not saying good-bye. When I turned at the path, I could see the three of them grouped there, staring at me like they thought *I* was screwy.

I never slept in a dead man's bed before. In fact, I could leave out that *before*. I was in Clark Reilly's bed, with the covers pulled over me, but I wasn't sleeping. I just lay there in the dark, listening to the katydid's screech *dead-in-bed, dead-in-bed, dead-in-bed,* over and over.

I tried counting the times, the way you count water dripping at night, but it didn't change the sound of the phrase. I'd counted to ninety when I heard the step outside the cottage, and stopped counting.

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He was making more noise than was smart. I heard him pass the porch, towards the rear of the house, and then I heard him again at the window. I could see the window like a black hole in the painted walls, but I couldn't see his face or his body until the flashlight went on, a yellow streak that sliced up from the window ledge, glancing off the knife in his right hand and spotting the center of the bed.

A leg came up over the ledge and the flash shifted again, showing the bare arm and the six-inch knife, and then the knife arm raised upwards and I centered my gun where his heart should have been. The knife blade shifted a fraction, ready for the throw, and I started the trigger squeeze.

The figure lunged sideways and the flash hit his face for a half second, just as the knife arm came down. I felt my hand jerk up automatically and then the gun blasted like a cannon.

He sprawled forward into the room, like a wounded frog. The tiny flash bounced off the body, twisting crazily, skidding like a snake of light across the room. It hit the wall, spun again, and then stopped moving, the beam lighting his face.

I sat up in bed, still holding the smoking gun in my hand, staring at the dead body of Richard Tallermand. Then, getting a grip on myself, I slid out of bed and snapped the light switch.

THE hole in his chest was about two inches from the center, which meant the bullet had pierced his heart. I stood there a long time, staring at the corpse, thinking of poor, screwy Richard, who painted like a child, and then I walked over to the phone and called Gaylord.

I didn't tell him what had happened, or why. I just said there'd been a new killing, and that he'd better round up Tallermand and the professor. I hung up before he could

press me and I went about setting the stage.

I arranged three green tumblers and a pitcher of water on the bureau and pulled a sheet over Richard's body, leaving the head uncovered. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking, when they finally arrived. My hat was on the bed, about six inches from my right hand. My gun was under the hat.

Gaylord's round little face was like chalk, criss-crossed with little black lines. He kept his hand close to his gun and he crowded the rest of them ahead of him, into the room.

Tallermand stopped just over the threshold, then sprang forward like a cat. "Richard," he said. "My God, Richard!" He looked up at me, his eyes smoldering.

The others were at his heels, as if drawn like buzzards to the body. The sheriff leaned down and raised the sheet, studying the wound in the chest. His eyes came up questioningly.

"He was at the window," I explained. "A knife in his hand. He was all set to throw, before I fired."

Gaylord nodded slowly. "Crazy," he said tightly. "Looks like you were right, Harkness. Richard's always been crazy—but we figured he was harmless, kind of. We figured wrong."

Tallermand said; "I don't believe it. I can't let myself believe he's a murderer. Unless he went totally mad—I can hardly believe it." He said it doubtfully, as if he were trying to convince himself, as if he knew he couldn't sell the idea to us.

So I agreed with him. I reached out with my left hand, knocked my green fedora to the floor, exposing the gun. I let my right hand stay where it was, next to the gun.

"Me, either," I said quietly. Just like that, quietly.

You could hear the silence as if a clock had stopped ticking suddenly. The curtain was up.

I grinned at them. I didn't feel like grinning, but I managed it. I

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pointed to a tear in the shade and a gouge in the woodwork behind it.

"Bullet hole," I said. "When I saw Richard's face, my hand jumped up. That's where my bullet hit."

Mallock dropped to his knees by the body and raised the sheet fingering the wound. He looked up at me, his eyes blank, his voice carefully guarded. He wasn't giving anything away, that guy wasn't. He didn't know what he might get.

"He's dead," he said quietly. "He was shot."

"He *came in* dead," I told him. "He was dead when he reached the window. He was a stooge. A stooge for murder."

"Stooge?" Tallerman caught my arm. He'd stopped posing now. He'd been badly jolted. "Stooge?" he said again. "I don't get it."

I leaned back on the bed, grinning at them. "I'll show you how," I said. "For all I know, the guy wasn't shot. He could have been poisoned." I leaned forward suddenly, nodding to Tallermand. "Give me that glass, will you? The red glass."

He took the one nearest him. He looked inside, as if he expected to see some queer mixture, then held it out to me. I shook my head slowly.

"The *red* one," I said, quietly.

Tallermand's face flushed and his eyes narrowed a little, but he forced a smile. "Sorry," he said nervously. He set the glass down and picked up the second, holding it out.

"The *red* one," I said again.

HE ALMOST dropped it. He stood there for a second, holding it in his hand, and beads of sweat broke out all over his thick face. His tongue crept out of the edge of his mouth, needling his lips, then crept back again. "Sorry," he repeated.

He picked up the third glass.

I laughed at him. I leaned back in the bed, my right hand inching toward the gun, and laughed out loud. The show was over.

Gaylord said, "What is this?" and

I stopped laughing. I hadn't really enjoyed it. I wanted this ended.

"A famous artist," I said, quietly, "with paintings worth thirty grand—and he fell for that." I swung back to Tallermand, but I wasn't smiling now. "They're *all green*, Mister," I told him. "Every last one of them. There isn't a red one in the lot. Like I expected, the killer gave himself away."

Gaylord said, "Oh!" and the professor shot up from the floor as if he were on springs, but Tallermand didn't move. He just stood there, holding the glass in his hands, staring at me. His tongue needled his lips again and the pupils of his eyes swelled like midget balloons, but he didn't move, and he didn't say anything.

I went on, explaining the rest of it. "*Richard* was the painter—and he was good. In spite of being whacky, he could paint. Tallermand sold Richard's stuff as his own."

Tallermand's right hand began shaking a little, as if with rage, and I noticed again how much like Laughton he looked. Not as Rembrandt this time, though. As Captain Bligh.

"Richard's brain began falling apart—and his painting fell apart with it. Tallermand knew it was the end. He insured his cousin's last work—and destroyed it, claiming theft."

If Tallermand's face had swelled an inch more, he'd have blown up on us. The red flush was a horrible thing to see. It was like watching a man go crazy before your eyes.

Gaylord shook himself, as if trying to force the ideas down. "The head," he said slowly. "Why cut off the head?"

"Reilly was on to him," I explained. "Tallermand killed Clark and tried to throw the crime on Mallock, or the Indian. He made a little head from some plastic, copying the shrunken heads, and slipped it in Mallock's exhibit for me to see. He must have stolen it again, later. He didn't

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know it took weeks to shrink a human head like that. He didn't know it couldn't have been Clark's.

"He tried to scare me off with the little clay figure, and when he found out I wouldn't scare, he realized I was right. Sooner or later, he'd give himself away. So he killed Richard, and pushed him through the window, just as I fired. He thought he'd covered himself completely. But he couldn't cover the thing he couldn't see. When he gave me his hat—a *grey* one—instead of my own bright green—I had him. And he knew I'd figure it, sooner or later. *Color-blind people don't paint.*"

The wind went out of Tallermand like a punctured blimp. His whole body seemed to collapse. His voice was as shrill as Richard's, "I could have . . . I could have . . ." and then he turned and dived for the door.

We never found out what he could have done. I raised the gun, centering it on his back, but I didn't fire. I didn't have to fire. Jivo caught him.

The Indian's right arm shot out like a piston, slamming Tallermand back against the wall. He lunged forward in a crazy sort of rush and Jivo's right shot out again. Tallermand fell forward like a stuffed giant, his body bouncing wildly as it hit the floor. His right arm stretched out full length, the heel of his thick hand just touching the crown of my hat.

I leaned over to pick it up, dusting the edges, staring at the gold *C. J. R.* printed inside. I looked up, feeling Gaylord's eyes on me.

"Used to be Clark's," I explained. "I borrowed it last month, because I liked the color, and I sort of hung on to it." I looked at the bed where Clark's body had lain, then down at Tallermand. "Funny," I said. "that it should be Reilly's hat that tripped him. Funny as hell, isn't it?"

I guess funny wasn't quite the right word. At any rate, nobody laughed, or even cracked a grin, Nobody—not even me.

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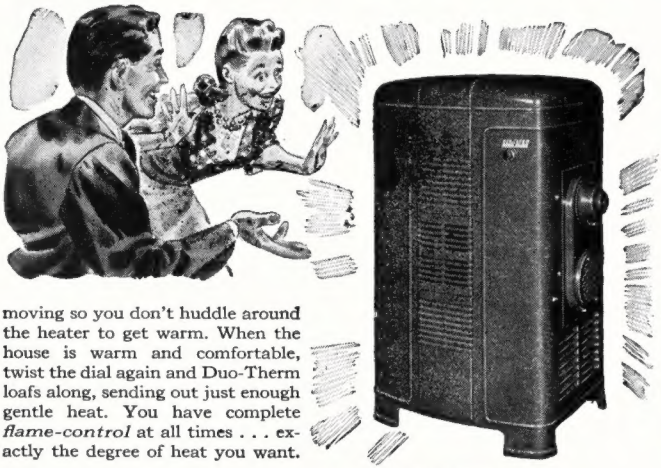

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